Season of Winter

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Season of winter

A snowfall had begun. The season of winter was here.

This is a story of something that happened a long time ago. In the northern part of Russia, in the days the Czars still ruled and the modern world, with all of its mingled blessings and curses, was but a dream in the minds of a few deep thinkers. In the northern Taiga forest, in a small unnamed village, lived a boy named Dimitri.

Dimitri was about fourteen years old with dark hair, the bright dark eyes of his father, and a muscular build for his age owing to the village's livelihood. For they all made their living by felling timber and selling it to a nearer town that had a railroad. Dimitri's father, a hard, sad, but not unkind man, spent his days swinging a heavy ax and loading logs for his son to take into town on their family cart. Dimitri knew the road well.

One day, he was driving his horse drawn cart down the dirt road when a light snow began to fall. It was never warm, and snow was never far away, but Dimitri never worried about the lighter flurries. He would arrive in town on time.

Suddenly, he heard a whistle. Looking up, he was surprised to find himself looking at a girl about his own age. She stood a dozen or so feet to his right among the trees, although he hadn't heard any footsteps announcing her arrival. She was covered from head to toe in white furs, but he could still see locks of golden hair tucked under her hat. Her eyes were the clearest blue, but sparkled with a wildness and mischief that looked as though it could never be tamed.

"Hello," she called out.

"Hello," Dimitri replied. "Are you new here? I don't think I've seen you before."

Of course he hadn't, and he silently cursed himself for the question. He would remember someone like her.

She laughed, and he felt still more foolish, but she beckoned to him anyway. "Come and play," she said.

Dimitri looked at his load, and sighed. As much as he'd love to, his father was depending on him to finish his job.

"I'm sorry," he answered. "But I need to keep moving." He thought a minute. "Perhaps later?"

The girl's demeanor changed instantly from sunny to sullen. Her lip quivered, and she darted away into the trees.

"I'm sorry," Dimitri cried. "Wait! Come back! Please don't be angry!"

But no answer came to his ears. Indeed, he couldn't even hear a footstep, which was odd given that the snow

was now deep enough to crunch. He listened, but in vain.

For a moment, he considered trying to run after her. But mingled haste and embarrassment prevented him. So, he turned, and continued down the road into town. However, his work was now the last thing on his mind.

Several hours later, he returned along the same path. The load on the cart was now replaced with coins in his pocket. The merchants in town had paid fairly, and his father would be pleased. If only Dimitri could say the same.

His eyes scanned the trees by the road where he had seen the girl. Although the sun was setting, the snow had stopped falling and the sky was clear. He was hoping to get a glimpse of the girl, or at least where she lived. He couldn't remember anyone living here.

A wet snowball hit him in the back of the head. Laughter sounded and he turned to see the girl from the morning. She pointed to him and laughed again.

"You didn't want to play," she told him with mock rebuke in her voice.

Dimitri was both irritated and relieved at the same time. Clearly, she wasn't too angry with him. He reached down, gathered up some snow, and hurled a ball of his own at her. It grazed her shoulder, and she squealed with delight. Soon, the two of them were engaged in a full blown snowball fight. Dimitri found himself having more fun than he had had in a long time. His village didn't have many other children.

He tossed another snowball at the girl, and she ran back into the woods to avoid it. Dimitri chased after her. Mischievous laughter echoed around him, and a gust of wind picked up, throwing snow into his eyes.

Dimitri blinked, and tried to brush the flakes away. When his sight cleared, he looked around. The girl was gone, but he could still hear faint giggles in the distance. He looked down, and saw her footprints in the snow.

He followed the tracks for a moment, but they grew fainter in the dimming sunlight. Finally, near a small lake far back in the woods, they disappeared altogether. Dimitri stopped by the lake and looked around. The water looked dark and frigid; blocks of ice large enough to stand on floated in the center, casting strange shadows in the dusk.

"Hello?" Dimitri called out.

No answer.

"Where'd you go?" he asked again, preparing himself another snowball.

But none came, and Dimitri felt alone here in this frozen still place. The sun was nearly set, and he felt he needed to get home. There was an eeriness here, a sense of not fully being in the real world that began to unnerve him in the growing darkness.

He called out one more time for the girl, but she still didn't answer. Satisfied that she had indeed left, and wasn't playing a joke on him, Dimitri turned away. He hurried back to his waiting horse, and drove the empty cart down the road.

Later, he arrived at his father's shack at the edge of their village. The other families had settled in for the night, and Dimitri saw the smoke rising from their own chimney. Craving the warm fire and the comforts of the familiar, he stepped in.

His father sat at the table by the fire, waiting. A tall, powerfully built man, little of his father's face could be

seen under the full beard and shaggy locks of hair. Dimitri was often reminded of Samson when looking at his father. Only instead of fierceness in the eyes, his father's were merely empty.

Once his father had been a man who had talked often and laughed hard. That was when his mother had been alive. However, she died of pneumonia many years ago, and his father's joy had died with her.

"My son," his father said. "You come late."

"I'm sorry, father," Dimitri replied. "I got distracted."

"Naughty boy," a raspy voice called from the shadows. Dimitri jumped as another figure stepped forward. By the firelight, Dimitri saw an old woman frowning at him. His heart sank; it was Mrs. Yaga.

Dressed in black, the old woman's form was hunched over and emaciated. Her hands were gnarled and covered in bluish purple veins that reminded him of

spiders. Her cheeks and eyes were sunken and her skin was yellow. What few wisps of hair she had were pulled back so tightly that he was amazed that they hadn't fallen out altogether.

"Soaking wet," Mrs. Yaga observed, noting the results of Dimitri's earlier snowball fight. "Playing in the snow is for children, not young men."

"Yes ma'am," Dimitri said, trying to keep his face and voice neutral. While he had been taught the importance of respecting his elders, he couldn't bring himself to like the old woman. There was just something in those colorless eyes and hard stare that lent itself to mistrust.

Oddly enough, none of the adults ever seemed to notice. Mrs. Yaga made her living selling herbs and other remedies to the woodsmen. She had tried to cure Dimitri's mother but had been unsuccessful.

"Didn't even get a fair price for your father's hard work, I'd wager," Mrs. Yaga continued, chiding him further.

"No sir," Dimitri said to his father and ignoring the old woman. He pulled the coins out of his pockets and laid them on the table. "Here is the money, father."

Mrs. Yaga snorted, but finally stopped talking. Dimitri's father nodded.

"I'm glad you made it back before dark," he said. "I'm not feeling well, and wouldn't want to go out looking in the night. That's why Mrs. Yaga is here. She's been brewing some medicine for me."

"Just drink two cups at night for a week," she said stiffly, headed for the door. "Good evening."

She walked out the door, pulling it shut behind her.

"Now tell me, what kept you?" his father asked.

"I met a girl on the way," Dimitri said. "She challenged me to a snowball fight."

His father grunted, and reached over to the fire with a pot holder. Pulling out a black iron pot, he motioned for Dimitri to sit at the table.

"There are better things to do with your time," his father said. He took a ladle, spooned soup into some bowls that Dimitri had set, and replaced the pot on the fire.

"Still. I suppose you will take notice of the girls now. Tell me, did you win?"

"Well, sort of," Dimitri said as they began to eat. "She ran away and I lost her by this frozen lake three or so miles away."

"You think you will see her again?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You would like to, yes?"

Dimitri blushed. He would, because he had been unable to stop thinking about her since her disappearance.

"Yes. You are of that age," his father noted again. "I wasn't much older than you when I first met your mother. She was the loveliest thing I ever saw."

He shook his head and stood up. "But this world won't tolerate beauty," he said bitterly. "It does whatever it can do to snuff it out."

He went to his room and shut the door. Dimitri suspected that his father cried in his room after speaking like that. With a sigh, he finished his own dinner, put the dishes away, and put the coins into a small sack above the fire mantle.

He glanced over at the door and jumped. It was still open a crack, and he thought he saw Mrs. Yaga peering

through. He blinked and the face was gone. When he went to latch the door more fully, he still saw no one.

Since he was tired, he shrugged, figuring that fatigue was clouding his perception. He thought about paying a visit to Mr. Domovoi tomorrow since there would be no lumber to carry tomorrow. His village was so remote that the woodsmen didn't have a church to go to. But Mr. Domovoi was a starets, or Russian holy man, who periodically came to preach or read to them from the Bible. He also spoke over any wedding or funeral that occurred. Since his mother's death, Dimitri went to him for advice or conversation.

The main room with the fire and table had two doors at the far end. One led to Dimitri's small bedroom, and the other to his father's. Dimitri entered his room, snuggled under his blankets and drifted off to sleep.

Thoughts of the girl, Mrs. Yaga, and Mr. Domovoi were in his mind all night.

The next morning, Dimitri hiked through the snow to a cottage where Mr. Domovoi lived. Smoke rose from the chimney, confirming that he was at home. When not out ministering to the woodsmen or hunting for his own food, Mr. Domovoi could almost always be found at home among his books. In his younger years, he had travelled all over Europe and to the Holy Land. Along the way, he had collected every book he could carry with him, from the Holy Scriptures to the histories of Josephus and Eusebius.

Dimitri knocked and the door opened, revealing an old man with a lean wiry frame, full grey beard and eyes that sparkled with wisdom and goodness. His gaze was everything Mrs. Yaga's was not.

"Dimitri, welcome," he said with a smile. "I haven't seen you in a long time."

"Yes sir. I had to go into town yesterday," Dimitri answered.

"I have been away for several days as well," an old man admitted, motioning him in. Dimitri sat at his table, and Mr. Domovoi poured them some hot beverages.

"A couple who live as trappers in the woods just lost their youngest daughter. So I have been with them, giving whatever consolation I could for them."

He sighed. "It is a terrible thing, losing a child. Pray you never have to, Dimitri."

They spoke together for a long time about all that had happened lately. Dimitri spoke more than Mr. Domovoi, as was usual. The old man changed little compared to all the changes in Dimitri's life.

Eventually he told Mr. Domovoi about his meeting with the girl.

"She was very pretty," Dimitri confessed, to the amusement of the old man. "But she seemed a little...odd."

"How so?" his host asked.

"There was something about her," Dimitri said. "Like she was full of tricks. She led me to the lake in the woods and left me."

Mr. Domovoi's smile wavered, and a thoughtful look entered his eyes. "The lake off the path between your village and town?"

"Yes sir."

Mr. Domovoi pursed his lips, folded his hands in front of him, and looked off into the distance for a while.

"Dimitri. Did you learn the name of your friend while playing with her?"

"No sir. I actually wondered about it, but never had the chance to ask."

"Will you do me a favor? Next time you see her, make it a point to ask. Then tell me about it."

"If you wish. But why?"

"Oh…I would just like to know the family. One never knows where spiritual guidance might be needed."

A week passed, and Dimitri's father cut enough wood to warrant a visit back into town. Dimitri himself had had to help, so hadn't been able to go back on the path until the cart was loaded with wood for town. Dimitri's eyes scanned for a fleeting sign of the girl on the way, but had been alone in the woods. On the return journey, he stopped the empty cart near the lake and looked around once again.

"Hello?" he called out into the snowy forest. "Are you there?"

"I'm here," she called from behind him. He whirled around, startled, while she giggled and ran away.

Dimitri chased after her, and the two played tag for awhile beneath the frozen ice covered branches. The sunlight caused the entire area to sparkle, and Dimitri felt his life's cares lighten for a time. Gone were his poverty, his unhappy father, and his sinister neighbor. There was only himself, the girl and the game.

Presently, however, he found himself remembering Mr. Domovoi's request. So he stopped running to ask the girl about herself.

"I’ve never introduced myself," he said. She stared at him curiously, as though she only wanted to continue playing.

"My name is Dimitri. What's yours?"

For a second, she didn't answer. Then a smile crossed her face, a smile that made Dimitri uncomfortable for reasons he couldn't explain.

"My name? My name?" She began to laugh. It was a high pitched, manic sort of laugh that he wasn't expecting. After all, why laugh at such a simple question?"

"He wants to know my name!" she cried out to no one. Then she turned and ran away. "He wants to know my name! He wants to know my name!"

Unnerved, Dimitri followed. He called out for her to stop, but she only mocked him and continued on. Presently, they came to the lake and Dimitri gave a shout of horror and dismay. Without hesitation, the girl jumped in, fully clothed. The ice water instantly swallowed her up, and she apparently made no effort to swim, for she failed to resurface.

Dimitri frantically looked across the entire surface of the lake for some sign. She was nowhere to be seen and he began to panic. He didn't dare jump in after her, because the near frozen water would certainly kill him. But what of her? Why would she do such a thing? Was she mad?

He frantically ran back to his cart and got home faster than he ever had.

"Help me!" Someone's fallen in the lake! Help!"

He ran up and down the rows of houses, screaming as loudly as he could. The startled villagers emerged, including Mrs. Yaga, who scowled, and deliberately walked out the far side of the village.

But others grabbed a pair of boats from a nearby shed. A group of the men followed Dimitri to the lake. The boats had nets, and were normally used for fishing

during the nominally warmer summer. Now they would be used to try and find the girl's body.

Dimitri, his father, and a group of villagers waited on the shore while the fishermen did their work. He hoped against hope that she would be found. That a miracle would happen, and she could be revived, even after several minutes of being submerged.

But the fishermen could find nothing, even after going over the entire lake twice. The adults could tell from Dimitri's distraught look that he had told them the truth, but their best efforts had turned up nothing. Moreover, there were no footprints or any sign that she had come out herself.

Dimitri began to cry. He felt too old for that, but didn't care. In spite of deep down knowing better, he felt like the girl's drowning had somehow been his fault. After all, he had asked the question that set her off.

His cries gave way to sobs, and his father laid a hand on his shoulder. But he had no words of comfort to give.

Dimitri lay in bed for the next several days. The grief at what he thought he had done nearly caused his health to break down. He could only think about the girl, and her plunge into the water. His father, not knowing what to do, allowed him to stay in the privacy of his room until the grief subsided.

But no solace came, and so his father finally sent for Mr. Domovoi. The holy man found Dimitri in his room as the sun began to set.

"I hear you witnessed a drowning," Mr. Domovoi said gently, pulling up a chair and sitting beside the boy.

Dimitri looked at his friend sadly. "She just dove into the lake sir. I tried to get help, but no one could find her. It's all my fault; somehow I upset her."

Mr. Domovoi looked grave, but no accusations passed through his gaze. "No, Dimitri. I don't believe you killed the girl. Please, I beg you, do not drive yourself into despair when you did nothing wrong. I will need you to think and act clearly tonight."

"But sir. I asked her name, and that's when she went crazy."

"That is because she had no name. Because she died before she received one."

Dimitri looked at him in disbelief. What was he saying? How could the girl be a ghost when they had played together? She could also be seen during the day. Weren't ghosts creatures of the night? He shook his head, understanding none of it.

"I suspected it when you told me where you saw the girl," Mr. Domovoi told him. "The lake is near the family I visited. The ones who lost their child before she could be baptized and given a proper Christian name."

"I don't understand. What does baptism have to do with it?" Dimitri asked.

Mr. Domovoi settled back in his chair, although he didn't relax.

"As you know, we enter salvation, not through mere belief or good behavior, but by making Christ lord of your life. Your entrance into His service is sealed with baptism."

Dimitri nodded slowly.

"But if a child dies before baptism, they are trapped in a limbo. Neither entering heaven nor hell, they wander the earth as rusalka, phantoms in the guise of young girls. Craving the baptism they never had in life,

they attach themselves to lakes, hoping one day for release."

"What can be done for her?" Dimitri asked. "Do you know?"

"Yes. I've dealt with this before. No, don't ask me about it. There's danger involved. The evil forces in this world will try to stop the rusalka's release. They cannot claim them for hell, but can harm those who try to help."

"But how are the...rusalkas...set free?"

Mr. Domovoi reached into his cloak and pulled out a vial of holy water. "We must baptize her, and give her a name," he explained. "Will you come and help? Although they crave baptism, rusalkas are afflicted with a type of madness. They resist seriousness and try to make mischief out of everything."

Dimitri stood up. His depression, fear, and questions were gone now, replaced with a resolve. He

believed everything he had heard, for the starets never lied to anyone. Nor did he speak about any matter that he wasn't well acquainted with.

"Yes sir. Let's go."

They quietly walked into the hearth room. Dimitri didn't see his father, and the other closed bedroom door indicated that he had fallen asleep.

"I didn't awaken your father when I came," Mr. Domovoi explained in a low voice. "That way I wouldn't have to explain. Come."

They went outside into the night, and a snow began to fall. Walking quickly, they had nearly left the village when they caught sight of another traveler walking along the road. The figure turned, and Dimitri saw none other than Mrs. Yaga.

"What do you think you're doing?" Mrs. Yaga snarled.

Mr. Domovoi pulled out his vial and threw a few drops at her. She cried out in shock and jumped back. Then Mr. Domovoi was running, practically dragging his young friend with him.

Dimitri didn't have time to ask questions, and they ran towards the lake. A few minutes later, they had arrived and Mr. Domovoi let Dimitri go.

"Call out to your friend," Mr. Domovoi said, nervously looking behind him. "Hurry!"

"Hello?" Dimitri called out. "Are you there?"

A moment later, he heard a giggle behind him. He turned and there was the girl. She smiled and waved.

Mr. Domovoi stepped forward. "Don't be afraid," he said gently. "I'm here to help you. Would you like to be free?"

He pulled out his vial of holy water again. She looked at it and, for a moment, her smile grew serious. Then she began to laugh again and ran towards the lake.

"Dimitri! Grab her!" Mr. Domovoi said.

Dimitri caught her and she began to laugh again, the same gleam in her eyes. She playfully tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but Dimitri held firm.

"Dimitri!"

He looked up, and Mr. Domovoi looked behind him. Off in the distance, through the snow, they could see Mrs. Yaga moving towards them. Though still far away, and hampered by the building storm, she looked at them with resolve, determined to reach them. For reasons he couldn't quite explain, the old woman terrified him as never before.

Mr. Domovoi turned his attention back to the rusalka. Holding up the vial, he looked at Dimitri. "Give her a name," he told him. "Any will do."

"Dimitri!" Mrs. Yaga called out again. Mr. Domovoi ignored her, but over his shoulder, Dimitri thought he saw her eyes shining in the distance.

"Alexia," he said to Mr. Domovoi. "My mother's name."

"Dimitri!" Mrs. Yaga shouted a third time. This time, her voice sounded dry and scratchy, like wood splitting apart as it burned.

Mr. Domovoi spoke to the rusalka. "Alexia, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

He sprinkled the holy water on her head. A bright light flashed before Dimitri's eyes and he fell backwards. He heard an old woman's scream of rage

and dismay, and when his eyes cleared, Mrs. Yaga was gone. He never saw her after that, but he could have sworn that in her absence the village seemed to be a happier place. Even his father began to smile on rare occasions after that.

His attention cleared to the girl, Alexia now. She was standing in front of him, the wildness in her eyes gone. In its place, a look of love and gratitude. She walked forward and hugged him. Dimitri returned the embrace, but found that she was beginning to feel fainter.

Looking at her, he saw that she was enveloped in a soft white light. Then, she began to slowly fade from view. She released him, mouthed the words 'thank you,' and vanished.

Dimitri stood there, dazed, not knowing what to do next. A hand rested on his shoulder, and he turned to

see Mr. Domovoi. The old man smiled slightly, and nodded.

"You did well. Come; let's get you home."

They walked back to their village in silence, thinking about what they'd seen and experienced that night. Things few others had known or would believe. Dimitri wrestled with the implications of it all for several minutes, and then spoke up.

"Mr. Domovoi, sir, may I ask you a question?"

"You may ask," the starets replied.

"Well…I just wondered why we had to rescue Alexia," he said slowly. "Why didn't God Himself do it?"

Mr. Domovoi didn't answer for a long time, and Dimitri feared that he'd offended him. But then he spoke.

"God is all powerful. At any time, he can and will intervene if need be. But…it pleases Him to involve His

children in the working of good. You, Dimitri, can be an answer to another's prayers. Never forget that."

When I was a child, my classmates loved to tell me stories. Perhaps merely for amusement, or perhaps they found me gullible, but I found myself regaled by the most outlandish of fantasies. My favorite one concerned the notion that in the basement of a certain house, one could see a glimpse of the gateway to hell.

The house in question was located off a side road on the outskirts of my hometown, and had been abandoned for longer than could be remembered. Given the small family graveyard in the corner of what was once the front lawn, I assumed that it had once housed a well to do, but now extinct line. Although once a farmhouse, trees had long sense grown around the place, hiding it from the neighboring road.

Despite the house's origins having faded into obscurity, my classmates made up the story that at certain times of the year, one could go to the clearing

and spy hooded figures standing over the graves, offering strange and unintelligible chants. This, coupled with the gateway theory, suggested the place had somehow become a border between this world and the next.

All of this was, of course, nonsense, and I had largely forgotten the boyhood stories for many years. I moved to the city, married, and got a job, as one does. But then, last night, I had a dream about the house. A dream where the gateway could indeed be found and crossed.

My sleep had been uneasy of late. Perhaps I had been reading too many accounts of the paranormal, including a rather interesting volume on the rusalka spirits of Slavic folklore. At any rate, in my dream, I found myself walking down the wooded path to the half forgotten ghostly house.

Oddly enough, I knew that I was in a dream. Normally, when becoming aware of that, the dream ends, but here, I kept moving forward, towards the house. My eyes scanned the graveyard for hooded specters, but I was quite alone.

Walking to a basement window at the back of the house, I peered in. There, just as my classmates used to say, was the gateway. Strictly speaking, it wasn't a gate, but a hole in the basement floor. It had a slight transparent look, as if it were itself a ghost, but I could still see a stairway leading down and a faint red light.

The sight of the pit threw me into a state of unspeakable horror, not for what I saw, but what it implied. Desperately, I tried to stand up and run away. But to my dismay, I found that my legs were sluggish and wouldn't respond to my will's commands.

Then, my body began to disobey me outright, for my hand reached down, picked up a rock, and shattered the glass that separated me from the object of my loathing. Then, before I knew what I was doing, I crawled down, hit the basement floor, and began to walk towards the pit.

The air around the pit was still. I felt a slight warmth, but was surprised to find no wind gust to greet me. With great reluctance, my mind still not in sync with my body, I took a few hesitant steps down the stairs.

Presently, I found myself enveloped in a low red light. I was in a tunnel, surrounded on all sides by smooth stone. The heat gradually increased as I made my way downward. All was silent. The staircase went on for so long that the only thing confirming my progress was the steadily increasing heat.

As I descended, I wished that I could begin removing my clothes to offset the dry heat. I could do nothing more than keep walking, however, and for the moment I felt curiosity tempering some of my fear.

Finally, I reached the bottom of the stairway. The tunnel didn't widen or open any further, but I didn't begin walking in a straight line. At my feet, the ground was littered with a few scattered bones, including a skull or two. I bent down and looked at them, wondering who they were.

I didn't have time to wonder long, however, when I felt something slam into me. Stunned, I picked myself up, my horror returning. There before me was an emaciated filthy man dressed in rags.

His face was mostly hidden by matted hair and a scraggly beard, but I could still see his eyes darting about, wild and lost. His form trembled as he stood to

look at me. Apparently, he was trying to decide what to make of me.

"You," he said. His voice was so dry and rough that I could barely hear him. "You aren't with him."

"Him?" I asked.

"The one who comes after me," he said. "I wasn't the best of people, I admit that. I committed a thousand transgressions in life, petty and not so petty. But he won't leave me be. His mere presence terrifies me!"

I shrugged to show my confusion. The man seemed to be ranting. Then again, how could anyone stay sane here, in the heat and stifling air? I took a slow step back to the stairway, wanting to get away, and finally finding myself in control of my muscles again.

"I followed him for a time, just to see what he was about," the man continued. I kept moving, but listened just the same, for there was something familiar about the

man’s dry voice and darting eyes. I had seen them before, but where?

"Is it wrong to dabble? Besides, I didn't find what I was looking for there. So I turned away, and have been running ever since, trying to find what I want."

"What was it you were looking for?" I whispered, stopping and answering him at last.

"I don't know!" he shouted. "I just know it isn't him. I stumbled in here some time after and have been trying to leave ever since. But he's always..."

He broke off, as he looked over my shoulder. His lips parted as a moan began deep in his throat and then grew into a bellow of pure terror. Slowly, hesitantly, I looked behind me.

Another man stood there, blocking the way back up the stairs. He was dressed simply but elegantly, and his beard was as trimmed as the other's was matted. His

eyes were the deepest and most penetrating I had ever seen. Despite the terror of the damned man, the other had no anger or challenge in his face. Instead, there was pity. And love.

He raised a hand and reached forward. "Come," he said to the ragged man at the other end of the corridor. "Leave this place."

"Stay away," he replied, standing up. "Stay away!"

He ran back the way he came, and the other man followed. I, too, went down the path, and found myself on a bridge. Far below me, I saw a mass of people, clawing and tearing at one another, seemingly more animal than human.

I will not speak any more about what I saw below me. The sights and sounds there are more than I ever wanted to know about the place and I can only hope in the feebleness of human memory to get it out of my

mind. I will add, however, that the rescuer kept reaching out to the doomed man.

Suddenly, a flare from below came up and caught him in the face, singeing away the dirty hair. I froze in my tracks, unable to move or close my eyes. For once the man's looks were cleared in this manner, I saw my own face staring back at me. Then my doppelganger dove over the edge, into the sea of lost souls.

I awakened in a cold sweat. For a long time, I lay there, paralyzed with fear. But then, as rational thought returned, I began to think on fear itself. Perhaps one of the things that kept people there, beyond the gateway, was fear. Fear of repentance. Fear of reaching out to the one who could pull them out.

I kept on thinking of fear well into the morning.

The Wax figures

Boxes and dust filled up a dirty little basement. Among the boxes were ugly picture frames and paintings covered by heavy canvases. Whatever else lived there was hidden by darkness.

A light came on, revealing a staircase at the far end. Two men appeared at the top of the stairs, carrying a heavy box. One man began walking backwards down the stair with one end while the second man helped to guide it down. Sweat glistened on their foreheads, and they struggled with the heavy load.

"You look tired, Bob," the first man remarked to the one holding the lighter end.

"Yeah, I am, Jeff," he replied. "I had this bad dream last night. I was in hell."

"Probably need to go back to church."

"Maybe," Bob agreed. They set the box down and took a breath. Bob looked over at the far wall.

"How about we just throw this on those other boxes?"

"Sounds good to me," Jeff answered. They picked up the load and, grunting under the weight, carried it over to the end of the basement. A small stack of dusty boxes lined it and they considered whether they should just toss it on top. After all, this was the basement of the Zabel Art Museum in lower Manhattan, a small, obscure, but relatively well respected institution. While the museum housed nothing priceless, the maintenance men still didn't want to risk damaging anything important.

So they tried to lower their burden gingerly onto the preexisting pile. Unfortunately, however, the load slipped and crashed into the wall. The men cried out as it punctured a large hole in the old dry wall. They didn't want to have to tell Mr. Ferguson, the curator, about this,

but they supposed they had no choice. They only hoped that the repair wouldn't come out of their salaries.

Then, they noticed something strange about the hole. Soft orange light was coming from it. Bewildered, the two peered through and saw a hallway beyond the drywall. Old electrical lighting illuminated it, and undoubtedly came from the building's overall power. Several rooms branched off on either side of the hall, and there was a brighter room at the very end.

"What is this?" Bob asked nervously. For some reason, he felt a chill run up his spine at the sudden discovery of a hidden corridor. What was it? Why had it been sealed off like this?

"I don't know," Jeff relied. "I don't like it. Let's get out of here."

He began walking backwards to the stairs. Although he had never admitted it to anyone, being down here had

always given him the creeps. Now he felt vindicated in his previously irrational fear.

"Wait a minute," Bob said. "Don't you want to see this?"

"No. I don't," Jeff replied. "I'm getting Mr. Ferguson."

"All right, all right. I'm coming," an important voice said from atop the basement steps a few minutes later. The two men walked back down the staircase again, followed by Mr. Ferguson. The latter was a tall man with a grey beard, bright eyes, and an intense, though not unfriendly demeanor.

"You see sir?" Bob said. "See that?"

Mr. Ferguson eyed the hole, and adjusted his spectacles thoughtfully. "Well now. Very interesting. Just plastered over before now?"

"That's right. We've been down here plenty of times before, and never knew there were another set of rooms."

"Nor I. But then again, I've only been over the museum for a few years."

Mr. Ferguson nodded to himself. "I'm the first non-Zabel to be over it, actually. The family is an old one, and has been well to do for decades, working in security and law enforcement. But a Mr. Alastair Zabel started this art museum at the turn of the century as another investment. The family eventually sold it as their company looked to relocate to the Midwest."

He peered into the hole. "Yes," he mused to himself. "Yes, there might be some hidden works here. Something of value, or at least something new to display. Move the boxes away, and pull down the drywall. Let's have a look."

"Um…sir?" Jeff stammered. While relieved that Mr. Ferguson wasn't angry, he was still unwilling to open the corridor. He'd frankly much rather buy a new panel of drywall himself to patch up the opening.

"Come, come," Mr. Ferguson said. "It's museum property. There's nothing wrong with it. Move the boxes and open up the hole."

Jeff swallowed, but reluctantly nodded. The two maintenance men began clearing the boxes until the wall was clear. Then they pulled out a router from a nearby supply closet, and began to cut away. Since it was old, the drywall gave easily, and soon a hole big enough for them to step through was out.

The hallway now had even more dust than it had before, and Mr. Ferguson coughed to clear his throat. Behind him, Bob and Jeff followed. Walking into one of the rooms, Mr. Ferguson saw an old cot with an empty

dresser. Although the mat had long dry-rotted, the curator was surprised to see no insects, spiders or vermin anywhere.

They walked to another room across the hall to find a similar room.

"What is this?" Bob wondered aloud. "Some kind of bomb shelter? Like in the fifties?"

"It's older than that, I think," Mr. Ferguson replied. "Look at the light fixtures in the wall. They're as old as the building itself."

"Why aren't the bulbs burned out?" Jeff asked.

"Hmm. Why indeed?" Mr. Ferguson said. He walked back into the hall, tapped a light, and thought for a minute. Both the fixture and the bulb itself were covered with a waxy film that kept the light from having any heat. He frowned. What was this place? Why would it be sealed off if nothing was here?

They kept walking and inspecting the rooms. Most were the same, although a side room near the end revealed a chair, bookshelf, and a floor littered with dry leaves. The shelf was bare, except for one dust covered volume on the bottom shelf. Mr. Ferguson picked it up, blew off a considerable level of dust, and read the corner.

"David Ellington," he whispered. A slow smile crept on his face. "Can it be? Is this his studio?"

He went into the room at the end of the hallway and gave a cry of delight. The room was completely bare except for four brown shapes. The first one was a cat lying on the floor, as if dozing before a cozy fire. The second was of an old man with a full beard and tattered clothes. The figure's posture suggested a man who'd died in a back alley.

The third figure was a young woman in equally tattered clothes. However, this figure's face was contorted in a mingled look of anger, fear and dismay. Her body was stiff, and her limbs were extended forward, as though fighting off an attacker.

The final figure was the strangest of all. It was a man in a tub with a look that Mr. Ferguson had never seen on any face, real or sculpted. For the curator could see that the figures were composed of wax. Furthermore, they were remarkably well preserved. He could see no scratches on them, and they had only a minimal coating of dust.

"What are these?" Jeff whispered behind them.

"Today is a great day for the art world," Mr. Ferguson told the handful of reporters that had answered his afternoon call. They were standing on the

steps of his art building, getting ready to enter. The mysterious exhibit had been moved to the main gallery, and he was going to have a full press conference to encourage visitors to the museum.

"David Ellington was a sculptor who burst onto the art scene of 1920's New York with two wax figures. A sleeping cat and a dead man so lifelike that he baffled and amazed all of his peers. Although he refused to discuss his technique or reveal the location of his studio, he appeared to be a rising star indeed."

"And you say his studio was here, all along?" a reporter asked.

"Yes. It would seem that Mr. Zabel himself was his patron," Ferguson answered. "David was your archetypical starving artist."

A few reporters chuckled.

"He lived in a homeless shelter that was once not far from here. After a few early sculptures, he hit his stride. Unfortunately, he mysteriously vanished shortly after that. His final sculptures disappeared with him, and only a few old photographs were left."

"Does the discovery of his workshop shed any light?" another reporter asked.

"I believe so. It would seem that he kept a journal."

More questions began to flow, and Mr. Ferguson raised a hand. “Please. I haven't had a chance to read it myself. Once I do, I will have another statement and will invite the police department if need be. Bear in mind, however, that if there was any crime committed, it was over one hundred years ago."

"Then you believe Mr. Ellington was murdered?"

Ferguson grimaced. "I didn't say that. There is no evidence of any foul play in the studio. Indeed, there

aren't even any tools or blunt objects that could be used as weapons. Until I have time to examine the journal, I'm afraid the mystery of Mr. Ellington will remain just that."

He smiled and opened the museum door, beckoning them in. "I can tell you this much, however. Two additional, previously unknown sculptures have been discovered. A woman, and a man in a bathtub. If you please, follow me."

He led them into his museum. The sculptures were all arranged under a soft light to emphasize the attention to detail. The reporters buzzed with wonder, both at the actual pieces and at the strange history that had brought them here.

They all began to walk around them, taking photographs. Ferguson himself smiled obligingly for the camera. Things were going wonderfully. At last, he could

both raise money and educate an increasingly vulgar culture about the beauty of finer things.

His smile faded, however, when his gaze passed over the cat. The tip of the tail had a bead of liquid wax. Dismayed, he looked closer to see several droplets of wax next to it.

He cursed himself for not having the restorers look more closely at the figures before rushing them up here. But they had looked perfectly preserved in the basement. Fortunately, none of the reporters seemed to notice, so he kept silent himself. After they were gone, he would take it to the restorer's room and that would be the end of it.

That evening, Ferguson sat in his office, perusing the journal. The cat had been deposited in the restoration area next to his office and he found himself

eager to begin reading the document. Perhaps, at long last, the mystery surrounding David Ellington could be solved. He opened the yellowing book, and began to carefully read.

‘A featureless door can be found in a red brick wall wedged between two other brick buildings on Deparin Street. It is the entrance to the homeless shelter where I have lived since coming to this cursed city. I thought it would be easy to make my living as an artist here, where the wealthy and cultured live. I was a fool. Six months and minimal fees for my sculptures have led me here, to a mission so small that it doesn't even have a sign on the front door to attract more clients than it could serve. I found it solely through word of mouth.

Past the door is a dark office where people are checked in and out. Going down a step, there is a

cafeteria to the left, more brightly lit since a few dingy basement windows let light in from the street. The serving counters and kitchen are next to the door. Clients walk to this station, get their food, and enter the cafeteria. The bathrooms are on the right of the steps, across from the serving line and door to the dining room.

If you walk past all this, there is a small living room that opens to a back fenced-in garden where one can get fresh air, such as it is. The sleeping rooms are located on the upper floors, accessed by a stairway in the living room.

It was a cold grey morning and I was serving lunch on the line with Silas, an ageing veteran of the Great War who also found his way here. In the cafeteria, I can hear Father Vincent Alighieri preaching. The mission is funded by the Catholic Church so the Father, a priest without a parish, comes here periodically between his

work at the dioceses' archives and library. A fitting position for him; he told me an unproven story that he is descended from the great Florentine poet.

"Many of you have experienced hardship beyond mere poverty," the priest was saying. "You have had harder lives than I can imagine. I know. God himself knows. God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit made us to have fellowship with us. But man squandered His gifts and rebelled, despite God's warnings that we would die if we did. Even then, He didn't abandon us. He came to the Earth to take on the sins of all and thus suffered greater than all."

A few men murmured 'amen' or nodded their heads. When I looked into the dining room, I could see some in agreement and some not. The priest continued, undeterred from his message.

"Dear friends, God does not promise us lives without pain. He does, however, promise never to leave nor forsake us. But there are times when you will not feel that God is carrying you. You will feel forsaken. Job, King David, and even Christ Himself in the garden felt alone and forgotten. This is not lacking faith, but what you do afterwards may be. It is in those moments of despair, those moments of doubt, that you must pray the hardest, even if you must make yourself. For it is in those moments when you will need him most.

"Be warned, however; it is not enough to believe He exists. It is not enough to try to do good deeds. There must be repentance and an active decision to make Christ your Savior. Salvation isn't a tally of your good works versus your bad. It is where your overall heart and mind are. Give yourself to him, repent of your sins, and he promises something better than this life. To have

him as Savior, to be with him after you die, is to have even the worst possible life here on earth seem but a nightmare. Let us pray."

The priest prayed for the lost souls before him. Silas lowered his head next to me for he is a Christian man too. I am not.

Father Vincent finished his sermon, and left the cafeteria. He exchanged a few pleasant words with Silas, but I always try to avoid his gaze. I hate discussing religion because religions always deny the true horror of life. Invariably, they treat doubt like it is your attitude that is wrong. Never is it others or life that is sinning. Evil is allowed to run free, but if you dare complain, it is you who are the villain.

"A great man," Silas said when Father Vincent left.

"Yes," I answered, as neutrally as I could. To be fair, the father is no hypocrite.

Silas, however, wasn't finished with me.

"You know, I used to be a wino," he said.

"I know," I replied. Silas never stops telling the story of his conversion.

"I passed out one day, trying to finish a bottle," he continued. "The doctors told me that if I took just one more drink, I would have died."

"I remember."

"But I came here. I gave myself to Christ." He smiled. "He is my way, my truth, and he gives me life."

The worst thing is that he not only believes, but he has a peace and happiness that I've never known. But I see the others. I've seen starvation and consumption take so many of them, and I wonder: where is God? Why are these things allowed?

I nodded politely to Silas, but didn't respond. As the mealtime ended, the men filled out of the cafeteria.

Some of them go to the living room, or their own rooms. Others leave through the front door and file into the street, not to be seen until dinner time. Where they go, I cannot say. Some have menial jobs, some beg, and probably some steal. I don't know and don't judge. I'm only a failed artist.

I left Silas and went into the garden. Taking out a pocket knife and a block of wood, I began to whittle the figure of a cat. There is a stray that skulks in and out of the yard, and it inspired me in my boredom to continue some creating. Not that I expected a cat to make my fortune.

I heard footsteps and, looking up, I saw Officer Curt Zabel making his rounds. He waved to me, and I back to him. I like him because I feel that he has a similar mindset to me.

"Hello Dave," he called out, looking over the fence. "What's that you're working on?"

"Oh nothing," I replied. "Just a cat."

"That right?" he said. "Can I see?"

I shrugged, stood up, and walked over to the fence where he had stopped. Handing it to him, I watched while he turned it over. He nodded, impressed, and I felt gratitude for even this much recognition.

He looked at me thoughtfully. "You do good work. Tell me, have you ever worked in wax?"

"Not since art school," I replied. "But then again, I can't afford many supplies."

He handed the cat back to me. "Well, the reason that I ask is that my uncle owns a small art museum a few blocks away."

"That's your family?" I asked. "I wondered, since Zabel isn't a common name. I never had the nerve to ask you, however."

"Oh, yes. My whole family, and several of our friends, came to this country about thirty years ago. We were wealthy in Europe, but here many of our old possessions were just curiosities. We opened the museum to make some profit from it all, but any more, most of us are, like me, either cops or guards. Until recently, several of us even lived in the basement of the museum."

"Well, I'm sure you've done better than I. This city is many things, but merciful isn't one of them."

"How long have you tried to sell any painting or sculpture?"

"Two years. Two long, lean, cold, and hungry years. Six months here alone."

"Ah. Tell me, if my uncle were to employ you, would you be interested?"

My head snapped up. "What would he have in mind?" I asked, eager for any opportunity.

"Wax work. My uncle is very interested in trying a new technique. But he needs a professional artist's help."

Officer Zabel stopped speaking and nodded again. "Yes. You would be just what we're looking for. Would you be willing to come and meet with him tonight, after the dinner hour? I'm off duty then, and can take you there myself."

"All right."

Curt nodded his thanks and left.’

Mr. Ferguson stopped reading to digest what he had learned so far. It was fascinating, just fascinating, to get

a firsthand look into Ellington's patronage and the beginning of his greatest works. It also explained the purpose of the subbasement rooms. He hoped that the sculptures would stay intact given their age and neglect.

He heard a crash from the restoration room, next door. His heart sank, and he stood up quickly. Please, he thought, don't let the Ellington original be broken.

Before he got to the room, however, a cat entered the hall from the open door. It was the most wretched thing he had ever seen. So thin that he could see the animal's rib cage, the cat's eyes were glazed over with a thin film, and it staggered around, as though drugged. Its ears flattened against its head, and it was covered with matted grey fur.

Mr. Ferguson supposed that a basement window had been opened as he was on a basement level, below the ground floor, but above the area where the hidden rooms

had been. The window to the restoration room was supposed to be locked.

"Shoo! Go away!" Mr. Ferguson called out.

The cat looked up at him and tried to focus. It growled low in its throat and meowed angrily.

He took a step towards it, but the cat hissed, and ran back in the direction it came from. Mr. Ferguson chased it back into the restoration room, but the cat was regaining its senses, and moved faster. Looking over its shoulder once more, it spat and bolted up a shelf to an open window. Then it vanished into the night.

The museum curator wasted no time in moving forward and locking the window so that the beast couldn't get back in. Then he looked at the work table and cursed. Sure enough, Ellington's cat sculpture was shattered into several pieces. Cat hair was stuck to some of the debris, confirming the vandal's identity.

Dismayed, Mr. Ferguson could see that it was far beyond repair. Odd, however, that it appeared to be hollow. He thought the maintenance men said it was heavier than it looked.

A few days passed, and the other three figures did indeed draw more patrons to the museum, generating much needed revenue. Unfortunately, the second figure, that of the man in a sleeping position, was also showing signs of melting. Mr. Ferguson had ordered the gallery's temperature turned down to counter the damage, and that seemed to work for a time.

The curator sighed to himself, as he entered his office. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. He hadn't had a chance to read any more of Ellington's journal, but was hoping now for some time to catch up on that.

He sat down at his desk, opened the journal, and began to read.

‘Curt took me to his uncle's museum. Indeed, his family possesses many great treasures, ones that would interest the archaeologist, as well as the sculptor. While there are relatively few paintings, there are several statues and jewels that range from Greco Roman to Egyptian to Babylonian. Sphinx like statues with the heads of bearded men stood guard in every room, seemingly watching all that came through.

After a tour of the exhibits, Curt took me down the stairs, past the basement, to a sub basement containing several rooms. In a parlor room among these, I came face to face with Alistair Zabel.

The elder Zabel is a strange man to say the least. He has no hair, beard or even eyebrows, although I'm not

sure whether this is from sickness or choice. His skin is dry and leathery, but his teeth are healthy and his dark eyes gleam brightly behind spectacles. His dress is elegant but unassuming and his voice is mild and gentle.

Zabel shook hands with me, had me sit in a chair and poured me some illegal wine.

I raised my eyebrows and he smiled. "One of our relatives is a bootlegger," he explained. "It's profitable, and since we have other members who are policemen,"

He indicated Curt.

"We can enjoy what others do not. Tell me, do you like it?"

"I haven't had any wine since Prohibition was declared," I answered. Briefly, I wondered if it was a test, but Curt helped himself, so I felt safe. Indeed, the alcohol tasted wonderful and did much to calm my frayed nerves.

"Thank you, sir," I told him. "I understand you have a position to fill?"

Alistair smiled again. "All business, are we?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I haven't had a steady job here yet. Not unless you count helping in the mission's dining room?"

"But you are an artist by profession?"

"If you want to call it that."

The two Zabels chuckled.

"Do you need a restorer? I saw that most of your collection is quite old."

"It is indeed. The Zabel family traces its line all the way back to Mesopotamia, to the oldest civilizations. Tell me, do you have any familiarity with the region's mythology?"

"Not really. Most of my art history was classical. Greece, Rome, the Renaissance, that sort of thing."

"Well, the myths and culture of the Middle East are far more ancient and, I think, more interesting. The area had its own pantheon of gods. Inana, goddess of war, for one. Or Enki, god of crafted things. Nergal, god of the underworld, and so on. There were also heroes, demigods like Hercules. The greatest one of those had to be the legendary Gilgamesh."

"Is his image up there?" I asked, pointing to the ceiling.

"Among others. There is a myth, you see, about the king Gilgamesh. Like you, he sought to be and to have more than life would give. After other adventures, it is said that he journeyed to the waters beneath the world in his travels. He found a plant that could grant his wish. One that could grant everlasting life. But a snake ate it, and shed its skin before he could partake of it."

"Go on."

"Thank you for your patience. Anyway, I was fascinated by the myth, and wondered if there was any basis in fact. So about a year ago, I funded an expedition to what was once the Ottoman Empire. They found the very thing the legends spoke of. The plant is real."

He gestured around the room, and I noted that it was filled with several potted plants. They were all odorless and ugly, and looked like some type of shrub. I couldn't say I've ever seen anything like them before.

Zabel stood and led me to the back room. It was scrubbed clean, and only contained a tub, a table with two apples on it, and another one of the bushes. Alistair picked up the apples and pointed to the tub.

"The wax is heated below with a small fire. It has extract from the Gilgamesh plant, as I call it. I believe that wax can serve as a vehicle for the plants preservation properties."

That sounded more like snake oil than art to me, but I let him continue. If nothing else, the story was very interesting. Alistair Zabel handed me one of the apples.

"I tried to inject plants and animals with the oil, but it made them turn to a dry wax like substance. So I hit upon the idea to administer the oil topically. You've worked in wax, I am told. You also have no family or connections, so you can keep a secret, I assume. If the medicine works, it would be an untold boon for the community, and beyond."

"I don't understand what you want me to do."

"I would like you to encase the apples in wax and make them look like a normal sculpture. In plain sight, we can study the effects. In return, I will pay you a grant, and display your work as the museum's primary exhibit. You will get exposure, and potentially be a rising star in the art world. What do you say, Mr. Ellington?"

We shook hands and agreed that I would encase and preserve the apples for a month's time. Then we would take down the exhibit and see if the apples would last or not. So I dipped the apples into the wax using tongs and arranged them on a platter with some of my own designs incorporated around them. It was only a start, but I was working. For the first time, I had real work and was so happy that I would have thanked God, if I believed in him.'

Mr. Ferguson stopped reading for a minute. A faint smell was creeping in, both rancid and pungent. He frowned, wrinkled his nose, and opened the door. It was getting too stuffy in here. Ignoring the smell, he skipped over a few pages, to the next month's entry.

‘Success! In more ways than one. Not only was my exhibit well received by the art critics, but the fruit was preserved by the Gilgamesh oil/ wax combination.

After the museum closed, Alistair, Curt and I took the fruit to the subbasement. Using a sculpting knife, I peeled away the wax. Within, the apples still gleamed red, and smelled sweet. I took a hesitant bite into one, while Alistair ate the other.

We feel no differently than if we had eaten fresh fruit from any outdoor market. The oil leaves a light musty flavor, as if trace amounts are still absorbed into the apple's skin, but I don't foresee any problems.

The next step of our experiment will involve something larger. I've been thinking a lot about the stray cat at the shelter. If I can get some sedative in the scraps I normally feed it, perhaps...’

The smell grew stronger, and Mr. Ferguson put down the book. He stepped out into the hallway and the smell was worse. Slowly, he walked back to the main exhibition hall. He looked at the Ellington display, and cried out in shock.

While two of the wax figures remained, the homeless man was gone. In its place was a corpse. Looking like it had been dead for some time, it was dressed in tattered rags. The figure also seemed to be covered in a light colored film of liquid.

"I'm telling you officer, I have no idea how this happened," Mr. Ferguson insisted.

The entire area was roped in with yellow tape and police detectives were taking pictures of the unwholesome sight. An ambulance was outside, and

EMT's were waiting to take the body to the police morgue.

The museum curator wished that the people would hurry up and leave. Not only were they keeping patrons away and spreading ugly rumors, but the camera lights were causing the final two sculptures to drip melted wax. He felt so frustrated that the exhibit had been plagued with misfortune since its discovery. If things continued as they did, then the find would do more harm than good to the museum's reputation.

"You have no idea who the victim is?" the detective asked.

"None whatsoever," Mr. Ferguson answered truthfully. "Officer, this isn't a perfect neighborhood, but I've never had anything even remotely like this happen before. Why would a murderer stuff a body here of all places?"

"Why indeed?" the detective mused, as another policeman came up.

"No signs of struggle," he told his superior. "We'll have to get the body out of here to be sure, but I think he probably died of natural causes, or possibly an overdose."

"What about that stuff on him?" the main detective asked.

The officer swallowed. "Well…I think it's some kind of wax."

Mr. Ferguson frowned. He didn't like the implication that was seemingly made.

"The sculptures in the exhibit are hollow," he told them. "I found it out when we had an accident with the other broken statue. The ruffian who did this clearly just tossed their victim onto the wax figure, breaking it. Why,

I don't know. It all seems like a sick joke, if it isn't murder."

"Now you said the museum is secured every night?" the detective asked.

"Yes. By me."

"No night watchman?"

"Only one. He won't be here yet."

"What about cameras?"

"We can't afford them. Only motion sensors connected to a security system. The museum wasn't doing well financially when the Zabels sold it." Mr. Ferguson frowned again. "Is there any sign of what could have happened here?"

The detective and curator watched as the EMTs took away the corpse in a body bag. Their gaze considered the remaining members of the display. They slowly began to feel their thoughts drifting to another

direction. One that left the rational behind, and skirted close to a place no man would ever want to go.

"Mr. Ferguson… are you sure the figures were hollow?" the detective said.

Their eyes met, and both could see that the other was thinking the same thing.

"Oh, you're joking!" Mr. Ferguson sputtered. "You can't think I…"

"I never said you," the detective whispered.

"Now look here, sir. This is a place of culture, not a Vincent Price movie!"

"Just the same, I'm going to have to ask for one of those figures," the detective replied. "I can take the woman, since she's probably lighter. At our forensics lab, we can have it analyzed."

"You can't…" Mr. Ferguson sighed. "Very well. Please show care to it, officer."

"I will. Look...I know this is crazy. I've never had any case like this. But is there any more you can tell me about David Ellington?"

"Nothing that isn't common knowledge," the curator lied. He wasn't sure why, but he was loath to tell the police officer anything about the journal until he himself had read through it. If he gave it to the detective now, he probably wouldn't see it again. Besides... it couldn't be that. There had to be another explanation.

"There's nothing else?" the detective asked dubiously.

"No. I don't think I've even seen a picture of the man," Mr. Ferguson said.

"All right. But here's my card. If you find out anything else, please give me a call. And I'm still going to have to question your security guard."

"Of course. Thank you officer."

When the police left, taking the woman statue with him, Mr. Ferguson had his own employees move the tub figure back to the subbasement where it was found. The temperature had been turned down to try and arrest the deterioration of the figure, but even that probably wouldn't help much.

His shoulders slumped, as he sat down at his desk. No doubt remained; the exhibit had completely failed. Perhaps the best opportunity he had ever had as a professional had melted away, both literally and figuratively. All he had left was an old journal and a morbid speculation.

The last part made him pick up the journal and restart his reading. He silently promised himself that he would turn it over to the police after he had read it

through himself. Besides, it couldn't be. He wouldn't find something like that in these pages.

‘The cat was easy enough to find and capture. The poor creature was so hungry that it gobbled up the drugged food almost instantly. Soon, it was out and I carried it to the museum where my employer was waiting. I fashioned myself a very handsome cat sculpture. Certainly more lifelike than any block of wood.

It remained on display for as long as the apples did, and met with even greater acclaim than the first. Everyone praises me on the lifelike quality. If only they knew.

I must confess, after my initial fears, I feel myself growing in giddy excitement. After so long living in

poverty and fear, I feel like I am getting some sense of control. If this proves successful, I am thinking of so many possibilities. If hungry or cold, I could hide in this until things improved. If there was disease, I could quarantine myself or someone else if I cared to. I could preserve food for long periods of time to store up. Why, as long as I kept a willing partner in the Zabels, I could do just about anything.

I thought of the men I roomed with at the homeless shelter. I thought of how the priest kept preaching and promising better things to come. Nothing changed, yet Silas and the others keep on believing. Sometimes, late at night, I wish for their belief. But now, I have something better. I have a power.'

'We are about ready to release the cat. I have brought it back down, and cut a few fissures in the wax.

The temperature had been turned up, and we expect the cat to break free easily enough when it gets out of its stupor.

Sure enough, the cat awakened with a panic. Mewing loudly, it shook its head and limbs to break off the remaining wax. It staggered to its feet, and eyed the three of us with alarm. We waited a few moments for it to calm down. I tried to feed the cat some food that I'd brought, but the animal was now wary of me, and backed away. I tried to reach out a hand, but the cat mewed angrily, not quite a growl, but a warning nonetheless. Curt reached down and pet the cat. While a little less hostile to him, the cat still shook its head and tried to walk away. It sensed something amiss, and we had to move slowly to keep it from panicking or it would never be recaptured.

Curt put a firm hand on the scruff of its neck. The stray cried out and tried to move away, but Curt put another hand on its back, pressing it to the floor. The cat grew angry and frightened, and began to growl and spit. Alistair took a syringe of the sedative, and injected the cat until it fell still once more.

"Put it in the wax," he told me. "Although we know now that animals can be revived, I still want to see for how long."

I agreed, and within minutes, our victim had been returned to its entrapment. While I worked carefully to make sure that the cat would look the same for tomorrow's display, Alistair sat down to discuss the next step.

"We need to find a subject to test it on," Alistair said thoughtfully. "Someone whom no one would miss, but would be able to be preserved."

"There are several homeless people at the mission," I suggested. "Perhaps I could speak to one who'd be willing..."

"No, that won't do," Alistair interrupted. "We must maintain secrecy. No one must find out what we're doing. You would have to knock out someone, and bring them here, like with the cat."

"That might not be easy," Curt replied. "If anyone saw us trying to do that, even I could only protect us from the other cops so far."

I thought for a while. Yes, it would indeed be difficult, but perhaps not impossible.

"Beyond the garden, some people who can't get rooms or who are too drunk to enter the building come and sleep," I told them. "If we got lucky, and had some chloroform handy, we could get someone."

"Yes. Yes, that might be the way to go," Alistair admitted.

"If we were caught, I could say I was removing a trespasser," Curt said. "That would be true enough."

"Then go," Alistair told us. "Find someone, but be careful. Take your time if you have to. We can't afford to be careless."

We walked back to the shelter, Curt and I. Neither of us spoke, as we were lost in our own thoughts. When we came upon the shelter door, we circled back to enter the back through the small garden. If anyone was still in the front office, I didn't want to have to answer any unwelcome questions.

I saw a man sitting by the back door, and cursed to myself. I had hoped no one else would be up at this time of night. Slowly, I approached the man, trying to act casual.

"I just wanted to get some fresh air," he began.

Then I stopped. It was none other than Silas. His eyes were closed, and I noted with bitter apprehension that he wasn't breathing. I touched his neck, and the lack of a pulse confirmed the worst to me.

"Dead," I remarked to Curt, who shrugged. After all, he hadn't joined the force because he cared for others. He had joined to give his family eyes and ears in the city’s doings.

I felt myself sicken at the sight of Silas' corpse, not due to squeamishness, but because I recognized my loss. The ageing veteran had been the closest thing to a friend I'd had since coming to the city. Now, I would never speak to him again; never hear the story of how he had been saved from the bottle.

My thoughts turned angry as I thought of that. Where were the comforting words of the clergy now?

Where was God and country when he was dying? Father Vincent preached that suffering was a test and tempering for the faithful. He often cited Job. But could this be a test? For what? I could see no reason at all.

Yet there was a peace in the dead man's face. A peace that I'd never known. A hope that flew in the face of all my unbelief. He had his reward; what had I?

A few weeks ago, I would have said nothing. Now, however, I had Zabel and his experiment. I had hope of escape and perhaps the power to overcome after all.

Still, there was one thing I could do for Silas. Yes, I could honor him, and full the next step in our research. I turned to Curt.

"Can you lift him?" I asked. "Can we take him back to the museum?"

"What for?" Curt protested. "We need someone alive. What can a dead man do?"

"We need to determine if it can preserve human flesh," I offered.

"He's dead," Curt repeated. "How can that tell us anything the living cat didn't?"

"We need to see though," I insisted. "A cat isn't a human. Besides, he'll just go in a pauper's grave. Please. He deserves more."

Curt frowned, but finally shrugged, came into the garden, and helped me lift him.

We had just rounded the block and were passing again by the front door when it opened. Father Vincent emerged, having evidently finished another sermon. He saw us, and his eyes widened with surprise and dismay.

"What is going on here?" he asked. "Dear God, is that Silas?"

"Yes, Father," Curt replied. "I saw him out back and came over to investigate. When I came over, I saw that he was dead."

"That poor man," Father Vincent said, sadness entering his face. He walked over, and I wished we could just leave. But we were caught, and could only trust that my co-conspirator's credentials would keep us from suspicion.

The priest leaned over and sniffed him. "No alcohol," he confirmed. "But of course not. He had put his trust in so much more. In someone more. He has his reward now."

"Excuse me, Father, but we will have to take him to the police morgue. I will need to have Mr. Ellington help me carry the body."

"I was taking a walk to ease my troubled mind," I thought quickly. "The officer called me over and I found him."

I let my voice trail off, and I sighed. "I knew there was something ill-omened tonight. I just had a feeling."

The priest looked at me for a moment. A very brief look of doubt flashed in the dark Florentine eyes. Perhaps I had said too much. I held my breath.

Then, Father Vincent pulled out some religious objects from his robes.

"At least permit me to administer last rites," he said.

I didn't want to, but I nodded, along with the policeman. When he finished and walked away, relief washed over me. We continued back to the museum, where a new exhibit would soon join the gallery.’

‘Father Vincent came to me a few days later. A grave look was on his face, and I could see that he wanted to speak with me. So I waited until after dinner, and then met him alone in the shelter's dining room.

"I went to the museum where your exhibit is showing," he began.

"Yes?" I replied, trying to keep my tone neutral, but dreading whatever he would say next. He couldn't possibly suspect, could he?

"I can see why you are becoming so successful."

"Not yet," I answered, trying to sound modest. "I have no paying commissions as of now. For the moment, I'm only trying to build my name. Fame must come before fortune for those who create."

"Your latest work. It's Silas."

I paused, but nodded. Don't make him more suspicious, I thought. Say anything to keep him off guard.

"I wanted to honor him," I said at last. "He was a friend, and had so little honor in this life."

"You captured him perfectly. Down to the last detail."

"I know him well, Father," I reminded him.

Father Vincent's eyes narrowed. "I realize that, but there's more to the sculpture," he insisted. "The details, down to his peaceful face at the end, all seem more than mere sculpture. It's as if that piece somehow is Silas."

Think, think, think. I silently told myself. Make up a half truth, anything.

"All right. Officer Zabel allowed me to have the body at my studio before he took it to the morgue. I had it as a first hand model."

"Good heavens, my son! That's horrible!"

"Why? I didn't desecrate anything," I countered.

"But to deny a man his proper burial..."

Then, I had an idea. A way to deflect the priest's meddling questions. Attack his faith. Put him on the defensive. That was why he was so upset about the mishandling of the corpse. His religion held burial sacred, with the body kept intact.

"Do you want to know why I make the pieces I make?" I asked, with a challenge in my voice.

He gestured for me to keep speaking.

"I do them, Father, to make a statement. To teach a lesson to the world. Do you think only you can give a sermon? I am trying to tell people of the world's suffering. To challenge their ideas of a good God. You say God loves us. You say that he can bring us through any hurt. Well, Silas was poor and dying. Silas didn't

ask for that. Didn't bring it on himself either, even allowing for the past alcohol problems. Why is this allowed?"

"God made us with a mind and a will," Father Vincent answered. "Evil came about when we used our will to disobey God. Like the devil before us, we rebelled and were lost. God won't go back on his own laws, so he sent his Son to die in our place."

"Stock answers," I said. "I've heard it before."

"You've heard, but have you listened?" Father Vincent asked. "Suffering is allowed so that we feel our need for Christ and come to him."

"Why? What does it matter? Heaven? Frankly, it never sounded that good to me."

The priest's jaw dropped. "How can you say that?"

He seemed to forget Silas and was in full preaching mode. So I hit him with what I'd wanted to say to him for a long time.

"You tell me that we go through all this pain, that God Himself went through all this horror too, on the cross, for what? To stand around in some place of gold and pearl singing forever! Is all this just to get a choir? Are the prophets and apostles serious?"

I began pacing. "What is the point? We trust a God who promises a reward that isn't worth it or become enslaved by our own vices and are damned. Next, you will tell me that God created a world that fell and needed a savior because free will matters. All arguments to reconcile pain and suffering to a good God take as a given that free will is well worth the potential and reality of evil."

I stopped pacing and looked at him head on. "I don't take that for granted. I think that a world of no pain, even if we were mindless, would ultimately be happier. That is why I make the art that I do. I want to make everyone question this world. It's what I believe and who I am."

He didn't answer for several minutes. Finally, he said. "I can't prove to you in words that having free will is better than not. You must simply believe that. However, you realize that you couldn't create or question if there really was no free will."

He frowned. "Yes, if someone could come up and try to take your will from you, you would fight with every fiber of your being. That fight for freedom that we all have proves its worth."

I didn't answer.

"So then, are you an atheist?"

"No. If I thought there was no more to me than the atoms in my body, this discussion would be pointless. If everything came from nothing, then our minds, thoughts, loves and morals would be mere accident. Since our minds are greater than matter, since they are supernatural, since they didn't create themselves, something or someone had to create them. Yes, I believe in God. I just want nothing to do with him. He gives us wills, but then doesn't do enough to stop those who abuse theirs."

"No, you're wrong. He did more than any of us, suffered more than us all."

"So you say."

"What about Silas? You make him a subject of your hopelessness, but he wasn't like that. He believed in a Savior. He had a harder life than you, but he believed still."

Father Vincent looked at me with something like pity and something like disapproval.

"Your art disturbs me, David. Your words still more. You keep following this path, and you will awake in a world of greater horror than the one you already hate so much."

He left, and I had nothing to say. Part of me wished I could believe as Silas did. But my outrage at this world held me back and pushed me on.’

‘Officer Curt and I lurked in an alley, watching people leave the mission. Those who couldn't or wouldn't stay the night were dissipating into the streets. Little did they know that one of them would be coming with us.

Curt had brought a squad car, and parked in the alley behind us. I had a rag with a liquid anesthetic in

it. Our plan was for me to ambush someone and knock him or her out so that we could keep preserving. In the event that someone caught me, the policeman would come up and pretend to arrest me so to avoid suspicion. Either way, the car would help us move the person quickly and discreetly.

I felt confident that it would continue to work. It is hard to convey how this bizarre experience has made me feel. I felt empowered. For the first time, I could build my reputation, my fate, and when old, I could hide away rather than surrender my soul to a God I won't serve.

The fact that I was about to commit a kidnapping bothered me little. After all, I thought wasn't I rescuing someone from a life on the streets? Wasn't I making them into a work of art that would be loved by thousands?

I spied a woman leaving the mission and walking past the alley. No one else emerged, so she was alone. I glanced over at Curt, and he nodded.

I walked out and caught up with her. She heard my footsteps, and turned around. She wasn't much older than I was, and her eyes had all the bitterness of a disappointed life.

"What do you want?" she demanded, having recognized me from the mission.

"It's getting dark," I commented. "Are you sure you should be out here alone?"

Her scowl deepened, and her pace quickened. "Go away," she snarled.

I walked alongside her, trying to appear casual. I put my hands in my pockets, to reach for the chemical rag.

"I'm needing to go up the next block," I said. "I'll walk with you, if you don't mind, then you can be on your way."

"I do mind," she said. "You'd better not try..."

I quickly grabbed her, pulled out the rag, and clamped it over her mouth. She shrieked under it, and tried to elbow me in the stomach, but I held her firm, and waited for the sedative to take effect.

"Hey, what are you doing? Help! Police!"

As the woman slumped in my arms, I looked up in dismay. Father Vincent had just emerged from the shelter, and had seen me. He was screaming for a policeman, and while I knew my acquaintance would be the one to answer the call, I felt my heart sink.

The experiment was over. My chances of a career would now be over. I would probably have to leave town

if I was to avoid other policemen besides Zabel getting involved.

Curt came up and began shouting for me to drop my would-be victim. As we had previously discussed, I complied. He came up and put handcuffs on me while a few curious onlookers poked their heads out from windows and side streets. Fortunately it was dark, and not many people were about. Plus the presence of the officer would keep them from further alarm or alerting any other authority.

"It's okay, Father," Curt assured Father Vincent as he came running up. "I'm taking him in, and my car is in the alley."

"Oh, David," the priest said, with mingled anger and regret that he hadn't been able to save me. I lowered my gaze and refused to answer as I was led into the car.

Alistair wasn't happy as his nephew explained what had happened that evening. In silence, I lowered the woman into the tub containing the wax. Using special gloves, I carefully dipped and coated her, then took her back out to dry on a drop cloth.

"You will need to disappear for a time, Mr. Ellington," the elder Zabel said.

I stood to face him. "How? Where will I go?"

"I suppose you can stay here," Alistair answered.

"We should take the exhibit upstairs down," Curt offered. "It might draw suspicion to us and get others involved if we let it linger."

"Yes, you're right," Alistair looked at me steadily. "You didn't have anyone who would report you missing? No family?"

"None that I've stayed in contact with," I answered. "And the mission would ban me now anyway, since they think I'm dangerous."

"Better and better," he said thoughtfully.

Curt and I went upstairs and carried down the cat and Silas pieces. We conversed in low tones about the experiment, and if we could continue to work on it down here. Zabel said we should and we decided to partially release the woman to see if she had survived the encasing.

I gently made incisions in the face and hands of the mold that covered her, removed the face mask, and waited.

Her eyelids slowly fluttered open, and in her grogginess, began to thrash in panic. She shook the mold that encased her and started screaming and cursing with fury and fright.

"Don't let her back out!" Alistair cried. "Hurry! Seal her back."

Curt and I picked up the woman and threw her back in the tub. The thrashing subsided and when I pulled her back, she was once again sealed up, albeit less peacefully.

"Good. It does work," Zabel said. "Now, you can go in as well, Mr. Ellington."

"Me?"

"Of course. How better to hide you? I could release you in a few months when this has died down, and you can go on your way. Or keep serving us in another city, for we need more research into the Gilgamesh oil. We need to see how long we can really keep people preserved, before too much of the oil is absorbed into the body through the skin. To high of a dose could be deadly, hence the reason we can't inject it."

I hesitated, wondering if I really had a choice in the matter. Alistair persisted. "You would be safe, wouldn't need to eat or go upstairs, and thus cause suspicion."

I thought about it, indeed, had thought about it before. Hide from the world that didn't understand, hide from a God I wanted nothing to do with. Perhaps, time would give me a second chance after all.

There's really not more to say. I told Zabel about the notes I had been taking, showed him this notebook, and gave him a few reminders on the process. He agreed to let me record the last several events, then keep it for future reference. So now I go to be preserved myself.’

Mr. Ferguson put down the journal, his hands shaking. The detective was right. The exhibit was really alive! It explained the cat, the corpse, everything.

He wondered why the Zabels had left the exhibit behind when they moved away. Clearly Alistair didn't keep his word with David Ellington. Not only didn't he free him from the ‘preservation’ as he called it, but he had sealed up the old sub basement to keep him from being found.

Did the latter generation of Zabels even know about this? And if so, did they simply feel confident that the subbasement would never be disturbed? What of the experiments? Had they continued? Were the Zabels still in possession of the Gilgamesh plants?

Mr. Ferguson got out of his chair. David was still here, he thought, and if he would follow the pattern of the other sculptures...

The phone rang, and he picked it up. "Yes?" he added nervously.

"Ferguson, thank God,” the police detective's voice said on the other end. In the background, he heard a woman's voice screaming and cursing.

"You won't believe this! There's a woman here, who was encased in the statue I confiscated. Where is the final piece?"

"In the basement."

"Check it. I think..."

On the other end, the woman's screams suddenly faded, and Mr. Ferguson heard the thud of a body hitting the floor. Other policemen's voices could be heard talking.

"She's dead."

"Good lord! Her skin..."

Footsteps sounded at the museum curator's office door. Mr. Ferguson stopped listening to the policemen on the phone, and called out.

"Who's there?" he demanded, hoping it was just the night watchman.

The door opened, and Mr. Ferguson screamed. The receiver dropped from his hand.

Mr. Ferguson!" the detective's voice sounded from the phone. "Are you there? Answer me! Hello? Hello?!"

Nowhere

The subway station, while well lit, was empty of other commuters, making Ben Wilson nervous. While he saw no trouble anywhere, he still always felt uneasy down here alone, and felt strength in numbers. Still, it was past the rush hour, and he supposed that it couldn't be helped.

He had been working late for most of the past month. As middle management, in an advertising firm, he was over a new important account. As usual, the people under him weren't working hard enough. They always pled overload of work and too little staffing. Wilson felt they were just lazy. After all, he was working over, wasn't he?

He sat on a bench and casually glanced at a newspaper. It announced that the Ellington exhibit had already been taken down from the Zabel art museum. He felt a flash of disappointment; he had wanted to take Sara there this weekend. He had barely spent any time with her, and she was starting to complain that he was getting as bad as Sam, her previous husband.

It had caused an argument last night, in fact. They didn't want to talk about Sam, as it opened up a chapter in their lives that neither wanted reopened. The way one

meets one's wife should be a fond memory, but in their case, that wasn't so.

Sam had worked for him, although Wilson hadn't known him well. It had been a busy year, much like this one, and Sam had been showing reluctance to be a team player. He wouldn't work overtime, wouldn't work extra shifts, and yet still complained to his coworkers about not having enough time for Sarah. Really, Wilson had little patience for people who wanted contradictory things.

Then, at a company party, he had met Sarah. She was the loveliest woman he had ever seen, with the most dazzling smile. They had struck up a conversation and had an instant rapport.

As the evening progressed, and Sam mingled with the other guests, the two soon realized a growing mutual attraction that led to the upstairs room. Doubtless,

alcohol had been a factor, but the attraction remained even after the hangovers had faded, so they kept seeing each other behind his subordinate's back.

Then one day, Sarah had called him in a panic. Sam had found out. He had gone through her text messages or seen a hotel bill or something, but had screamed at her and stormed out.

Wilson remembered the panic he'd felt that day, and had ordered the security guard of the office building to watch for Sam. But then, he didn't show up for his shift, and he had relaxed somewhat. Afternoon came and went, and still not even a call in. He hadn't been sure whether to be relieved or afraid that the cuckolded man was somewhere lying in wait for him.

He had considered having security escort him out when the police came. Sam had evidently thrown himself in front of a moving subway. It hadn't been the one

where he was now, but Wilson still felt uneasy every time he was alone in a terminal like this.

He put the paper down, and looked around. All was quiet; the evening train was due in about five minutes. Thank goodness; two years after Sam's death and he still didn't like the subway. The only reason he bothered was its convenience compared to a car.

He and Sarah got together in earnest after that. Although she hadn't wished Sam to do what he did, she was also relieved that the need to hide was over. Some of the office people talked behind his beck, but he just let them. After all, it didn't have any bearing on his work.

His subway rolled up and the door slid open. Wilson stood and walked in, as the door shut and the train continued on its endless circuit through the underground. He looked around and saw that his car was empty except for another man seated with his eyes

closed. Wilson took a seat next to him, and quietly watched the other stations go by. It was so quiet that he almost forgot the man next to him until the latter spoke up.

"Long way to go, sir?" he asked.

Wilson shrugged. "Not too far."

The man opened his eyes, and looked out himself. "I always enjoyed the subways," he remembered. "I've ridden them since I was a kid. Lived here all my life. You?"

Wilson nodded politely, but hoped the man wasn't going to turn into a babbler. He pitied people like that for their loneliness, but also felt they were lonely because they were so annoying.

"Yeah. I could always get a moment's peace here," the man continued. "Even if busy, it was a respite from home and work. My wife..."

He sighed. "She always wanted more time with me. But in the next conversation, she'd always chide me for not advancing in the company. 'Lack of ambition' she called it. Then she started demanding we get a bigger house, nicer things. She never stayed happy for long. What was she looking for?"

“That's too bad," Wilson said. His terminal near home was coming up, and he stood, happy to get away from the stranger and his self pity. Still, he supposed he should show some empathy.

"Well, I get off here," Wilson said, trying to sound kind. "Hang in there, huh?"

He turned, and waited for the train to stop and let him out. The station came into view. But then, it kept on rolling and Wilson found himself still staring down a dark tunnel.

"Hey! My stop!"

Annoyed, he pulled a cord near the door to get the train to stop at the next station. It was several blocks away, but still walkable. Irritated, he wondered what had happened. Usually, this line never experienced inefficiency.

"Still," the stranger continued behind him. "She had the most amazing smile. Is that what drew you to her, Ben? It did me."

Wilson felt like he'd been shot. He whirled around to confront the man. Who was he? How did he know his name? Had they met?

"What did you say?" he demanded.

The man stood. Wilson tensed, but didn't see any weapon in the man's hands. Nor was he wearing a heavy coat where he could conceal one. Still...

"Don't you recognize me, Ben?" the man asked.

His appearance didn't change, but now, for some reason, Wilson recognized him. He wondered why he hadn't before now.

"Sam?!" But it can't be. You're dead."

"Can't it?" Sam asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, Wilson noticed that the train rolled through the next stop without slowing down. What was going on here? He felt trapped and he didn't even know by what.

"How can you be here? Now?" Wilson asked. "Shouldn't you be in hell? You killed yourself."

"Do you believe suicide to be the unpardonable sin?" Sam asked. His voice and expression gave no clue to what he was thinking.

Wilson hadn't been to church in some time, but seemed to remember that suicides were damned because they usually had no time to ask forgiveness after. Yet,

here Sam was, and he didn't look like he'd been in hell. Where had he been? For that matter, where were they now?

"You don't think God considers whether the suicide is sane or mad?" Sam continued. "Or how they were driven to it? Do you think he is pleased with the indirect murderers who send people down that path?"

"Look here, Sam, I didn't push you in front of that train," Wilson said. "What happened between me and Sarah wasn't planned. It was just…life."

"And death."

"You could have done something else with your life. Why didn't you just get a divorce and move on?"

Sam didn't answer. Instead, he lowered his gaze, walked to the door that connected their car to the next one, and left.

Wilson shook, blinked, and swallowed hard. Cold fear gnawed at his insides; he had seen a ghost. A vengeful, accusing ghost from his past who was holding him accountable for two years ago. But he hadn't wanted Sam to die. Of course, what he did had been technically wrong, but he hadn't hurt anyone. Why apologize for something he never meant?

And why did Sam just leave? As a ghost, he could easily have hurt him back. Instead, he just retreated. Or was she still waiting in the other car? Slowly, hesitantly, he took a step to the door. He hoped the ghost was truly gone, but couldn't stay in the same spot forever, he supposed.

He walked into the next car and looked around. There was no sign of Sam. Then, he decided to walk to the next car, then the next, then the next. Not only did he

see no sign of the ghost, but he saw no one period. He was completely alone in the train.

Although relieved that he was seemingly free, the fact worried him. Even more so was the fact that the train still hadn't stopped. Another empty station terminal passed him by and the train showed no signs of ending its journey.

He looked around the car he was in, and saw a plaque with an 800 number to report any questions and complaints. Wilson began to think that maybe the train had malfunctioned, perhaps because of Sam himself. Maybe there were some maintenance people, someone somewhere who could shut down the train and get him off.

He pulled out his cell phone. Its screen was completely dark. Wilson frowned; it had had well over half a charge before he left earlier. Granted, reception

underground was sketchy at best, but he should at least have the screen lighting up. He tried hitting the button, then shaking the phone, but it was completely dead. Now he was really starting to panic.

A few more minutes went by and he saw another station coming by. Desperate to get off, he would do anything to escape. Once the train reached the station, it would pass by a concrete platform. If he jumped, he would hit the ground hard, possibly breaking his arm. But he wouldn't fall into the tracks and would, most importantly, break free.

He reached out and found that he could pry open the door with a hard tug. Ignoring the fact that he shouldn't have been able to do so, he gritted his teeth and jumped at the platform where passengers normally waited to board.

He landed hard on his side, and he felt a sharp pain in his arm. Shouting in pain, he felt like he had been crushed. His vision blurred and tears welled up in his eyes. He closed them, and lay for several minutes in agony. He wished that someone would help him, but hadn't seen anyone other than Sam since this ordeal had begun.

Finally, he opened his eyes to look around. His pain notwithstanding, he was out. Now he could get up and get medical help.

However, when he staggered to his feet, he saw what should have been impossible. He wasn't standing in a station. He was still in the train car. He had jumped from the subway and landed in the subway.

Outside, the station he had tried to jump to vanished around a bend, and the train entered a dark tunnel.

"Sam?" Wilson called out. "Sam, are you there? Sam! I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Sam!"

He received no answer. Ben Wilson began to scream.

Several hours later, Sarah descended the steps to the subway terminal where Ben should have disembarked. He was late; she had tried to call, but couldn't get through. She had tried to phone his work, but it was closed for the evening.

Feeling that she somehow needed to go look and make sure he was all right, she decided to go to the agency. If he was still there, he could still buzz her in, even if the phones were off. She hoped he had just forgotten to charge his phone.

A train stopped and opened its doors. Sarah got in, and saw that the car was empty except for one man reading a newspaper. She couldn't see his face behind

the paper, but was too distracted to give it any more thought.

The train began moving to its destination. Behind the paper, a familiar voice asked, “Long way to go, ma’am?”

Jonathan

"There it is," Quinn said.

Sheila Cochran stopped her car where the paved road turned to a gravel one. At the end of the road was a small graveyard on the right. On the left was a house

where the caretaker's family lived. A cornfield bordered the place on the far side, and beyond that was an old abandoned house atop a hill.

Sheila narrowed her blue eyes and ran a hand through her red hair to push it back. The place, once they were actually here, seemed no different than a hundred other county cemeteries scattered throughout Indiana. The old plot here held nothing out of the ordinary.

Still, despite being mid October, the cemetery wasn't why they were here. Earlier, at lunch, they had been sitting and talking with their friends in the high school cafeteria. The conversation had generally revolved around how boring Oakwood was. Nothing interesting had happened here in their lifetimes. None of them could wait until graduation when they would attend college and finally go out into the world for some excitement.

Sheila had remarked offhand that she would do anything for something different now. That's when another friend told them about a house in the nearby town of Rodman. Supposedly, there was a cemetery caretaker who had a son that he never allowed to go outside. He was shut in and home schooled because the caretaker wanted no contact with others.

It sounded like a wild rumor, but the friend had dared her to go there and see if it was true. Quinn had agreed to go along to be a witness and they had made their way here after school. Sure enough, the place was real, but that didn't mean the story was. Indeed, she felt a little foolish now, wasting an afternoon in the middle of nowhere. Quinn was already pulling out her phone and surfing the internet for any interesting news stories.

"Looks like some New York executive disappeared in the subway a month ago," she remarked. “He never

returned home, and his wife went looking for him in the same subway. She disappeared, too. Spooky.”

Sheila grunted. "Put that away, will you?"

"Why? You want me to take a picture or something?"

"I don't know." She looked at the cemetery and house again. No one was in sight, and she considered the house. It was the same pattern that most of the Oakwood subdivision homes were, so she figured that the bedrooms would be on the left side, facing them.

"If there was someone other than the caretaker, he'd probably be in the front bedroom. Don't you think?

"I guess. Why don't you just knock on the door and see who comes?" Quinn asked.

"And say what? That we want to see if the shut in rumors are true?" Sheila retorted. "No way. Not unless you're coming too."

"Forget it. This is stupid," Quinn said. "Let's just get out of here. I'll tell everyone we came."

Sheila thought about it. While not wanting to meet the caretaker, not knowing what he'd be like, the rest of the rumor intrigued her. Looking at a window, she got an idea. Reaching behind her, she pulled out a notebook and pen from the back seat.

"What are you doing?" her friend asked.

"Writing a note," Sheila answered. She read it aloud as she wrote to see what Quinn thought.

"Hello. My name is Sheila Cochran. I'm a junior at Oakwood High School. I've heard about you, and how your father won't let you leave the house. If you need anyone to talk to, and if you can, email me at this address."

She wrote down her email address. "Hope to hear from you. P.S., this isn't a joke."

Quinn smiled incredulously at her. "You're not?"

"What's the harm? She replied. "I'd like to think this isn't a total waste of time."

She got out, and slowly approached the house. There was still no sign of anyone. So she walked up to a window, put the note there, and ran back.

Quinn was laughing at her by the time she got back in the car. "Holy crap, I can't believe you did that."

"Yeah. Me neither," Sheila agreed. They waited in the car for a minute. Then she turned the ignition and drove away.

Sure enough, their classmates got a good laugh from their adventure. Quinn had the ability to make what had been a stupid whim the topic of conversation all day. Sheila supposed that was fine, but had started to feel doubts about it all. Was there really a shut in boy? And if

so, was it wise or kind to harass him like that? Or what if the parents found her email address and contacted her parents or the police? They could easily make a case that she'd been trespassing.

Those thoughts went through her mind all day until she went home. Casually, she went to her family's computer and logged into her email account. Her heart sank when she saw a message from an email account that she didn't recognize. At first, she was afraid that it was the police. But the address didn't look official. She blinked, and clicked it to see who it was. It read:

'Dear Sheila, my name is Jonathan Hanover. I saw your note and created an email account to answer. I have to talk at night, because my dad wouldn't let me contact you when he found the note. He never lets anyone over. Sometimes I get lonely, though. I'm wondering why you wanted to talk. If you get this, email me back.'

Sheila stared at the monitor for a long time. "Who'd have thought?" she said to herself.

"You mean this came from the caretaker's house? Quinn asked.

They were seated next to each other in keyboarding class. The period was winding down, so the teacher was letting them work on assignments for other classes. Sheila had pulled up her email account and showed Jonathan's message to her friend.

"It has to be," she answered. "Who else could it have come from?"

"I don't know. What about the parents?"

"No. If they sent the message, they'd have told me to go away and never come back. Why would someone pretend to be this Jonathan? No, I think he's real."

Quinn frowned. "It could be a creep pretending to be someone our age."

"You read too many internet news stories."

"Well? What are you going to do about it?"

Sheila began to type in a reply. "I'm going to learn more."

"Sheila!"

"Oh, relax. I'm not going to go back there. What can a message hurt?"

She typed in that she had contacted him out of curiosity. She asked him why his parents never let him out. She asked him if he needed any help. She promised that if she could, she'd try to get the police.

Quinn watched her type. "You really think there's abuse there? Is that why you're doing this?"

"Maybe. Something's not right there," Sheila said. "Even if his parents believe in home schooling, who never lets their children out?"

She got a message back the next day.

'I don't need any help. No, I'm not in trouble. Dad is very kind to me, except when it comes to people. He hates other people. He says they're all arrogant, selfish and cruel. Is that true? If so, please don't email me back. If not, tell me more about yourself."

"Wow," Quinn said, reading it over her shoulder. "What kind of life can he have?"

The two girls had put away any thoughts of just doing something to amuse themselves. Not only had the rumor about Jonathan's existence been confirmed, but they felt a wave of compassion for him. What kind of monster would so completely cut off their child form the world and then try to blame the world itself for it all?

They spent the rest of the period ignoring their assignments and instead crafting a longer message for Jonathan. They talked to him about their classes mostly; their teachers, assignments and so forth. Then they asked him if he had any similar subjects taught to him.

A few weeks passed and they were walking through the hall, talking about their strange new acquaintance. They had now exchanged several emails and had learned that Jonathan had had a similar education to them, albeit in seclusion. They had discussed books they had read, and concepts that still puzzled them in math. He did watch TV, and had a video game system, although he had never been to a movie theater. He had a gym to work out in his basement, but had never been to a sporting event. All in all, he seemed to be leading a decent life, but his

father still remained adamant about not letting him have contact with anyone else.

Sheila found herself increasingly wanting to actually meet him face to face. She had been thinking about the Halloween dance this weekend, and had actually asked him if he could sneak out and meet them there.

"You don't think he'll say yes, do you?" Quinn asked. "He can't leave his house. You see that his emails always come real early in the morning, and not every day."

She shook her head.”He's a prisoner, Sheila. A prisoner of a crazy father."

"You never know," Sheila replied as they walked into the library. It was lunch, but they decided to get on the computer instead to see Jonathan's answer. They got a guest code from the librarian, and stepped into the computer lab.

When the logged in, and pulled up the email, they were dismayed to read Jonathan's response.

'Sorry. I can't leave. I don't have a car anyway. Have fun.'

"Told you," Quinn said. "Unless you're going to the police, there's nothing you can do for him."

"I can't prove anything so I can't call the police," Sheila replied. She had begun to type a response.

"I'm telling him to sneak out and meet us on the road," she said. "We can pick him up, and take him back. We don't have to stay out all night either. Just get him out of there for awhile."

"Won't work."

"Quinn. It's wrong. No one should be forced to live like this. Besides, it's a costume party. No one would ever know he's there if we're cool about it."

She finished her message and had to wait two days before getting a positive response.

That weekend, Sheila and Quinn slowly pulled up to the road leading to Jonathan's house. They kept the lights down, and tried to stay far enough away that the car would only sound like some passerby. She was dressed like a zombie queen, with a tiara and prom dress mixed with decay makeup.

Quinn and her boyfriend, Chuck, were dressed up as Goths. They had decided to bring along Chuck since he was a football player and could help if Jonathan's father showed up. They were long convinced that the shut in was no hoax, but just wanted to make sure they were safe.

Sheila hadn't really wanted to let anyone in on their secret, but supposed that being careful was the wisest

thing to do. She felt nervous, but eager at the same time. At last, they would see Jonathan.

She looked up, and saw a guy approaching them. He was wearing royal robes, a crown and grotesque makeup that made his eyes look black and his lips pulled back into a permanent sneer. It was Jonathan; he had made it. He'd even remembered to dress up.

He nervously walked over to the car. "Sheila?"

His voice was very mild and pleasant, and put their lingering fears to rest. Quinn opened their passenger door and stepped out "Come on. We need to go."

He went in and sat next to Sheila while Quinn shut the door and went in back to sit next to Chuck.

"Hi. I'm Sheila," she said, reaching over to shake his hand. "This is Quinn and Chuck."

"What's up?" Chuck asked. "Nice costume."

"Thanks. You guys too." He smiled nervously. "I didn't know what to wear, so I just grabbed some things."

"Looks like I had the same idea," Sheila said, smiling. She pointed to the house. "Okay to go?"

Jonathan nodded. "I told my dad I wasn't feeling well, so I could get to bed."

"Doesn't he suspect?" she asked.

"No. I've never done anything like this before." He looked back nervously. "Are you sure this will be..."

"We won't be too long," Sheila assured him. "Let's go."

They went to the dance and all went well. They had gotten Jonathan in by telling the chaperones that he was Chuck's cousin from out of town. They had all mingled for a few minutes before Quinn and Chuck left them to go dancing.

Sheila and Jonathan didn't dance, so they talked with a few more classmates. Jonathan was polite, but naturally shy; fortunately, no one knew they were talking to the rumor. Sheila had wanted to spare him that. Luckily, he wasn't so awkward that he raised suspicion.

After a while, they stepped outside for some fresh air. The air was crisp and smelled like dry leaves, but the temperature was pleasant and the sky clear. They could easily see each other in the light of the school's parking lot.

"Having fun?" Sheila asked as they walked.

"Yes. Thank you for bringing me," Jonathan said. "It means a lot."

He looked at her. "You know, my entire life dad has been telling me about how terrible people are. About how no one cares, about how badly they'd treat us if we let them. But you're not like that. You've been kind."

Sheila took his hand, feeling sympathy for the poor, friendless boy. She wanted to take him out of his home life, wanted to do more. But all she could give him was this night, this moment in time.

He looked at her hesitantly, and awkwardly bent his face to hers.

"Wait a minute," she said. "Let's get out of these silly costumes first."

She took off her tiara and shook out her hair. Then she reached into her pocket, pulled out a few moist toilettes, and scrubbed the zombie makeup off.

"There. How's that?" she asked, smiling.

Jonathan smiled back, and she handed a few toilettes to him. He took off the crown, and began wiping his own face. When he looked up again, however, Sheila's smile faded.

His face looked exactly the same.

Sheila's mouth opened in mingled shock and horror as he leaned in close.

Song of Sorrow

"Hey man, it's great to have you back," Jim said.

"It's good just to be back, "Travis replied.

He pointed to the hospital they were leaving. "I don't want to ever go back there again."

Six months ago, Travis Pike had been a struggling college student and aspiring rock musician at Oakwood University. He and his friend, Jim Turner, had formed the band Gold Jacket, and had been performing on campus. Hoping to make it at least a secondary career, they had been recording their first album.

Then, everything changed. Travis had been walking in the woods one day, trying to get away from the busyness of life. He had happened upon a creek, and discovered the body of a young woman.

She had been in her early twenties, with long blond hair and a very pretty face. The police had identified her as Emily Stone, whose family had started Stone Records. She had been struck in the back of the head with a hard object, possibly a rock, and drowned.

The murder still remained unsolved. There were no witnesses, and no suspects. Although her elder sister, Tabitha, had been a suspect at one point, she had been shown to be in a recording session at the time of the murder. So Tabitha Stone grimly took sole control of the family assets with no further questions.

Unfortunately, there was another effect of the scandal. Travis began having nightmares and panic

attacks from having discovered the body. Rather than risk falling into alcohol or drugs, he had checked himself into the psychiatric ward of Whately Hospital. Now, after six months, the frightful visions of waterlogged bodies seemed to be behind him.

They walked to Jim's car. "How's Quinn," Travis asked, referring to Jim's younger sister.

"Quinn's fine," he replied as they got in. Jim started the car and drove out of the parking lot.

"Listen, I've been thinking a lot about the band," Travis said. "I want to start recording again as soon as we can."

"Sure Travis," Jim said. "Sure. But let's not worry about that tonight. I'm getting you home and ordering a pizza in. We should relax for awhile."

The scenery turned from the main part of the town to the suburbs. Travis lived in a small ranch house near

the university. Although Jim had initially been rooming in the dorms, he had agreed to house sit for his friend until he was back.

Presently, Jim pulled the car into the driveway. Slowly, Travis stepped out. It felt almost surreal being back here, after where he had come from. For months, he had been plagued with what he had witnessed. Now the mundane scene of home greeted him, and he didn't know how to feel.

He would go back to his music, he supposed. Then, back to school. But perhaps Jim was right. Not tonight.

"Welcome home," Jim said, handing him his house keys.

"Thanks." He walked up and opened the door.

Unlocking it, he stepped into his living room. Looking around, he was pleased to see that nothing had changed.

"I appreciate everything," Travis told Jim. "Look, if you want to stay in the guest room, I wouldn't mind."

Travis bit his lip, and sat down on a chair. "The first few days are going to be the hardest. I need to make sure it'll be all right."

"Sure," Jim replied. "How about that pizza?"

"Sounds good."

They ordered dinner and ate without saying a whole lot more. Travis talked about his therapy, the endless talks with the psychiatrists, and their insistence on overmedicating him. He had been released with a few prescriptions, but he only wanted to fill the tranquilizers and maybe just the first month of the antidepressants. He'd taper himself down like he'd heard the doctors talk about with the other patients. After all, he didn't want to go through withdrawal, but didn't want to take pills his whole life either.

After dinner, Travis walked to the spare room. In addition to the two bedrooms and the living room and kitchen, there was another small room in the house that he used to keep his band equipment. He went in and saw the gold jackets they wore on stage, a set of drums, a keyboard, and his prized possession, his acoustic guitar. Although he could play the electric guitar, he had a soft spot for the instrument he had learned to play on. Besides, he felt the simple instrument served the alternative sound he loved better anyway.

Travis smiled and picked up his guitar. He strummed a few notes and looked at Jim.

“No offense, but I think I missed this the most." He played a chord from a song that had been popular in their high school days. "Remember this? The song that made us want to start a band?"

"Yeah," Jim frowned. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Just want to pick up where I left off, that's all." He looked at Jim reassuringly. "Let me play for a few minutes. Then, I'll go to bed. I promise."

"Fine. Good night, and again, I'm glad you're back."

Jim nodded and left the room. Travis waited until he heard a door shut, and then reached into his pocket. He pulled out a long strand of hair that he'd kept ever since being in the psychiatric ward.

When he first found the body of Emily Stone, he had been beyond horrified. But at the same time, he felt a strange feeling of being drawn to her. Somehow, someway, he almost felt like he'd found his muse. Like Beatrice for Dante, he had found a beauty that could never be his. He could only admire it from afar, and that admiration would drive him to beautiful thoughts and beautiful works.

The police had come and taken the body, of course. Before they came, however, he had reached out and took one of Emily's hairs form her head. He would, in spite of the horror surrounding her death, honor her memory. He would live his life, get better, and continue to sing. For her.

He thought once more about the hospitalization as he bound the strand into his guitar to become one of the strings. He had told the psychiatrists about his wishes when he was discharged. They hadn't disagreed, but still increased his meds.

He strummed the guitar quietly, thinking. He had gotten through; he was home. Time to look ahead, and keep on making music.

A few days later, Jim found Travis in the living room, writing lyrics to a new song. He was pleased to see his

old friend working. After all, he was still in school, and couldn't watch Travis all day. Not that he was severely afraid for him, but still figured that constructive work was far better than idleness.

"I've been composing," Travis remarked. "I want to see what you think."

He handed Jim the paper, and Jim read it over. The title was Song of Sorrow. It would of a lonely woman who met her untimely death by drowning. It spoke of sadness and loss for a woman the world would never know, and of all the lost souls like her.

"Wow," Jim said hesitantly. He looked up. "Are you sure you want to sing this?"

"Want to?" Travis echoed.

"Well, don't get me wrong, the rhythm and rhyme are perfect, but it's just so sad."

"We're alternative singers," Travis smiled. "We're supposed to be sad, aren't we?"

"Very funny."

"We need a different sound and message for Gold Jacket," Travis pointed out "Look, anyone can sing about getting drunk and sleeping around. Anyone can whine about their lives when their only real problem is that no one 'understands'. But us, we have something else to say. Our music can be about something. About someone."

"Travis, if you need to do this to cope, I get it. But do you really think we can make a career out of it? Or should?"

"I don't 'want' to, to answer your first question," Travis said. "I have to. Like any artist, I have to create what comes to me."

He reached down and picked up his guitar. "She was so beautiful, Jim. Everyone should know about her."

Jim didn't answer, not knowing what to think. Emily had been attractive, but hardly the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen. Still...

Travis began to play and Jim heard the music that was to go with the words. He listened and admitted to himself that the words were enhanced by the melody a hundredfold. It was still sad, but the sadness took on a haunting beauty that made him listen quietly. The song had his full attention.

Travis sang the lyrics, and Jim felt his thoughts change. He had been wrong. Emily had been beautiful, so pure, and so lonely. She would have done great things, would have made one lucky man so happy.

Her death had taken away that possibility, forever. She would do nothing, belong to no one. Jim realized that he might have met her if life had been just slightly different. Emily had had the power to be anybody's

someone. That is what would draw the listeners in. That was where the bitter sweetness came in.

Jim's eyes misted and he rubbed a hand over them. It was so unfair. Life was unfair, not just because of the nonsense others sang about. But because of the tragedies that happened every day. Because of the Emilys of this world.

Travis finished the song, and studied his friend. "You feel it, don't you?" he asked. "The song."

"Yeah. I do," Jim replied. His own voice had grown hoarse.

"That's how I was when the song came to me," Travis said. "I knew I had something to give to others. I have to. This can't be kept for just the two of us."

"It's an amazing song," Jim agreed. "We'll make a demo and start going to record companies."

"I called Stone Records while you were in class," Travis said. "We actually have an appointment tomorrow."

"Stone Records?" Jim repeated, impressed. "But that's too soon to record a good mix of the song. Couldn't it wait a few days?"

"We already have a tape of our old material. I figured we could just take that."

"But it's not as good. Just generic sound compared to this. You said so yourself anyone could sing our old material."

"It's good enough to show potential." Travis ran his hand lovingly over his guitar. "I figured I could give them a live version of the instrumental part. We need to get it out there, but need to have the time right as well."

"Isn't Stone Records the business Emily's family owned?" Jim frowned; the song had made him feel like

he'd actually known her. He had just referred to her like an old friend.

"It is. I thought that if anyone deserved part of the royalties, it would be them." Travis raised his eyebrows. "Why? Is that a problem?"

"Well, I hope not. But what if they don't like it? They might not want a hit that constantly reminds them of losing a loved one. Even if our feeling about it is right and it does make them a lot of money."

Travis sat in thought for a minute. "That's why I only want to give them an instrumental version first," he said at last. "We can get a feel for them; if they seem not to like it, we can change the name and death."

"I don't know. That might alter the song. Couldn't we just go to another record producer instead?"

"It'll be fine." Travis stood up. "Let's get something to eat and get to bed. We have a long day tomorrow."

That night, sad music woke Jim out of a deep sleep. He lay there for a few minutes, feeling that he was still dreaming. Presently, however, he realized that he was really hearing music, and supposed that Travis couldn't sleep.

Still, although tomorrow was Saturday, they still had to get up early. He walked out and stepped in the hall. The door to the music room was shut, but he could hear the guitar. Slowly, entranced by its melancholy beauty, he walked forward.

He opened the door, and poked his head in. "Hey, Trav, it's getting late."

The music stopped, and he looked around, bewildered. There was no one in the room. He blinked, and his brow furrowed in confusion. He'd heard the music. What was going on?

A hand touched his shoulder, and he jumped. Turning around, he saw Travis standing behind him.

"Travis! You scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry man," Travis smiled sheepishly. "What are you doing?"

"I thought you were playing."

"No. I was asleep until I heard you."

"But...but I heard it." Jim pointed helplessly at the room. A shiver tingled down his back; he had indeed heard something. He had never imagined or hallucinated before.

"You just heard the music in your head. I heard it in mine too. The song gets under your skin that way."

Jim shook his head. He was groggy, yes, but didn't feel that groggy.

Travis smiled again. "Hey. I was the one in the hospital, remember? Just relax and go back to bed. Tomorrow will be fine."

"Ms. Stone will see you now."

The Stone Records executive led them into a plush office for a meeting with the owner of the company. Tabitha Stone bore a striking resemblance to her late sister, except her hair was brown instead of blond, and pulled back into a tight bun, emphasizing her high forehead and piercing stare. She seemed to be assessing them and already finding them lacking, and Jim wished Travis wasn't insisting on using her as a possible producer. Surely, there would be other buyers; he already didn't want to work with her.

"Jim Turner and Travis Pike," she said, nodding with minimal courtesy. "Of Gold Jacket. Please, sit down."

They did, and Jim found himself wishing that they hadn't worn their gold jackets. Indeed, he found himself wishing that they had chosen another name. What had seemed unique when they were freshmen now felt silly and immature under the eyes of this producer who had probably seen it all.

"I understand you've cut a demo that you're interested in selling."

"Yes, ma'am," Jim said. "We've been performing at bars and for fraternities for the past several months. You can see it all on our resume."

The assistant handed the resume Travis had emailed him. She looked at, raised her eyebrows, and turned her attention to them.

"There aren't any jobs for six months," she said. "Can you explain that for me, please?"

Jim swallowed, but Travis spoke up. "I was in the hospital for a while," he confessed. "I was having a hard time, but I'm okay now."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said, not sounding sorry at all.

"I wasn't into drugs or anything like that," Travis said. "I don't go for that sort of thing."

See didn't answer, and the assistant spoke up. "Perhaps if we listened to a few of your songs?"

They played the demo, and after three tracks, Ms. Stone motioned for it to be turned off. "You have some talent," she admitted. "But the fact is, so do a lot of people. How exactly will your sound be any different?"

"Well, I'm working on a new song," Travis said. He pulled his guitar out of the case he had carried with him to the interview. "This is a song about the trials of life. We feel pain, we lose those we love, but we don't let that

destroy us. We take that pain, and create something beautiful to share with others, and celebrate our loved ones' lives."

Ms. Stone's mouth twitched once, but other than that, she remained impassive. Jim hoped Travis wouldn't say any more; he was coming close to revealing that he knew about her sister's death. Ms. Stone very likely wouldn't want to be reminded of that. Worse, she might feel like he was patronizing her.

Before she could say anything, however, Travis began to play. As they had agreed on, he only played the instrumental music. But even this had a lot of power. The assistant wiped his eyes, and looked genuinely moved by the music, although Ms. Stone herself didn't seem to feel any effect.

"That's...that's extraordinary," the assistant said. Ms. Stone looked at him.

"You think there's a market for it?" she asked. "You have a better feel for current trends than I do."

"Oh yes. This definitely has potential."

Jim felt some of his stomach knots loosening in relief. They had a chance after all. Ms. Stone, however, pursed her lips in thought.

"Tell you what," she said. "I'm not going to lie; I'm not a huge alternative fan. Frankly, it all sounds like the same guy to me in every band. That being said, if you can impress the other executives, we'll talk about a limited debut album. It will need to include the new song too. You think you can have lyrics and background music in a few days?"

"I can," Travis nodded.

"Good. Monday night, I'll have a company dinner. My colleagues will be there, and you can come to play them

some of your best material. If they're happy, then we'll talk."

Sunday night, Jim awakened to the sound of a guitar solo. In the music room, he could hear the Song of Sorrow being played. He felt a rush of adrenaline as he remembered the guitar seemingly being played by itself earlier.

Stepping out into the hall, he saw that the door to the music room was shut, but a faint light could be seen through the door crack. He shuddered, somehow knowing that it wasn't Travis playing. For several minutes, he just stood there in his doorway, frozen in fear. Why was this happening? The house had never been the witness of anything paranormal before. Why now? Why the song that Travis had just composed, the same song that was supposed to make their careers?

Slowly, hesitantly, he stepped out and went to Travis' door. He opened it, and saw that Travis was fast asleep. Whatever or whomever was making the music wasn't his friend.

He quickly but quietly went in and tried to shake him awake.

"Travis," he whispered tensely. "Travis! There's someone in the other room. What are we going to do?"

He shook and shook, but Travis was in the deepest sleep he'd ever been in. Frantically, Jim looked around and saw a baseball bat by the closet door. He grit his teeth, picked it up, and stepped back into the hall. Whatever was going on behind the door, he'd have to handle himself.

He slid the door open, but this time, the guitar wasn't playing by itself. Instead, a young woman was sitting with her back turned to him. She had long,

straight blond hair, and looked like she'd just stepped out of the rain, although it was a clear night. Then he noticed that there was a matted red spot on her head.

The woman turned around and put down the guitar. It was Emily Stone. Dripping wet, her skin was clammy and grey. Her eyes blazed with mingled fury and anguish. Not for a moment did she look like the beautiful muse Travis sang about.

Jim screamed and dropped the bat. Emily's blackened lips curled back into a snarl, and she rushed forward. Jim tried to pull the door shut, but the figure pounded on the door and tried to force it open.

"Travis!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Travis!"

Travis never came, never stirred from his sleep. Then, Jim's eyes grew dim. He suddenly felt all his energy leave his body. Although determined to keep the

frightening figure locked in, he slumped against the door.

Sometime later, he became aware of someone shaking him. He looked up and saw Travis standing over him in concern. Jim looked around and saw that it was morning and he was still in the hallway.

"Hey. Are you all right?" Travis asked. "What are you doing out here?"

"Travis," Jim murmured, trying to clear his spinning head. He staggered to his feet and looked at the music room. Then he remembered.

"Emily!"

He yanked open the door, hoping to show his friend where the phantom had been. But there was nothing out of place, no pools of water on the floor, and no sign that

anyone had moved the guitar from where Travis always left it.

"Emily?" Travis echoed. "What about her?"

"She was here, Travis!" Jim said, knowing how it sounded, but unable to stop himself. "Her spirit, as she looked when she died. It was horrible."

"Jim," Travis shook his head. "Nothing was here. I slept across the hall all night."

"You wouldn't wake up," Jim replied. He took a deep breath. "Travis...I think there's something wrong. Is the song you've made somehow stirring her?"

"That's crazy, man. When you die, you're in heaven or hell. Besides, even if there are ghosts in between, she was never here when she was alive."

"It's the song," Jim insisted. "She was playing the song. I think we shouldn't play it. I think it's..."

Travis scowled darkly. His demeanor instantly went from concerned to angry. "Well, we are playing the song tonight. I don't know what you're saying, but that's final."

"But Travis, it's giving her strength..."

"Of course it is! It keeps her memory alive."

"No, I mean her ghost. You didn't see her eyes."

"Her death wasn't right, Jim!" Travis shouted, making him jump. "It wasn't right! She should be remembered, mourned."

Travis looked at his watch. "You need to get ready for your classes. Why don't you get this idea out of your head? We'll talk tonight."

It was a miserable day at school, more than the usual Monday, before Jim made it back to Travis. All day, the past night followed by Travis' temper that morning

echoed in his mind. Why had he gotten so angry? Why was he so unwilling to consider changing the song or postponing? Jim still didn't like what the song seemed to be doing to him.

Jim opened the door, and saw that the living room was empty. His heart sank when he heard the guitar playing down the hall. He swallowed, but walked to the door anyway. Before he opened the door, he silently prayed that it would be Travis and not Emily waiting for him on the other side.

Fortunately, it was only Travis sitting down and playing the Song of Sorrow. Although Jim was glad to see that the ghost hadn't returned, Travis was wearing his gold jacket. He fully intended to go through with the demo concert at Stone Records.

Travis glanced at his old friend. His eyes looked through him, and focused on something else.

"It's time, Jim," Travis said tonelessly. He seemed to have forgotten all about their fight earlier. Indeed, he seemed to have forgotten about everything unrelated to the song.

"Travis, look," Jim said, smiling uncomfortably. "I've been thinking...not that I don't want to do the song but, I mean, you don't look like you're up to it right now."

As he stammered, Jim felt a dampness in the air, as if the humidity in the room had gone up in the last few minutes. Certainly, the tension had.

"I feel fine, Jim," Travis replied. "I have to."

"Why? Why tonight?"

"Because, they'll all be there. This song belongs to them. It belongs to everyone."

Jim bit his lip, as Travis stood. Travis' fingers absently strummed the guitar. Jim flinched, and something hit his head. He looked up, and saw that the

doorway had a leak. His eyes scanned the room, and he saw that droplets of water were running down the walls. The dampness increased, and he felt that he was facing down something that wasn't of this world.

"Travis," he tried again, shaking. "Let's get out of here. Get some coffee. I'll call Quinn; you always liked her."

"It just came to me this afternoon. Ms. Stone, Emily's sister. She killed her. She stole her life. Why did she do that, Jim? The money? What was she hoping to buy? What did she think would give her happiness or security?"

He staggered towards him, but Jim put his hands out. "I'm not letting you go..."

Suddenly, a cold damp hand clasped over his mouth. He screamed through it, and felt someone behind him strike the back of his head. Travis watched blankly as the

unseen person behind Jim wrestle him to the ground, pinning him, and smashing his forehead against the door. Jim's vision blurred and he never saw his attacker. But he did see Travis' feet as his friend walked away. A second later, he heard the car start up and drive away.

Jim struggled to get to his feet, and looked around. He was alone and the music room was now dry. He went to the living room, and called the police. Part of Jim didn't want to, for fear that Travis would be sent back to Whately, perhaps indefinitely. Yet, he was clearly under the influence of something unworldly.

They went to the campus church sometimes, so he whispered a prayer as he dialed the police station.

"You think our friend is a danger to the Stone Records people?" the policeman asked.

Jim sat in the passenger's seat, watching the streets of Oakwood passing by. The officer had his lights on but no siren, so they'd be there in minutes. Jim hadn't told him about the specter of Emily, only about their gig and how Travis believed that Tabitha Stone was Emily's killer.

"I didn't know for sure, sir," Jim answered carefully. "All I know is what he told me. Travis isn't violent, and is clean, but he was the one who discovered Emily Stone's body in the creek. He was at the hospital over it."

They pulled into the recording studio's parking lot. They both got out of the car, and the cop drew his gun.

"You stay back," he told Jim. "Only follow if I say so."

He opened the front door to the lobby, and heard no sounds of distress. Instead, they heard Travis' guitar from the board room playing some of their older music.

The cop hesitated for a moment, and then beckoned Jim to follow.

They entered and walked down the hall as the executives applauded.

"Thank you," Travis' voice called from behind the door. "Now I'd like to sing my latest piece. I need to tell you all a little bit about myself. You see, I found the body of a beautiful young girl who'd been murdered in the woods. I've never felt what I felt then, the horror, the sadness. But I wanted to keep the memory alive. To tell her story. Here it is."

They opened the door, as Travis began to play and sing the song. Most of the executives barely noticed them, for they were already becoming enraptured by the song. All of them, that is, except Tabitha Stone. She sat at the end of the row of chairs in shock while Travis

performed. The table had been pushed off to the side to give him a center stage.

Her shock, however, soon gave way to anger, as she recognized who the song was about.

"You. You discovered my sister's body," she said, standing up indignantly. "Then you come in here, and make a song about it? How dare you! Is this a joke!? You can leave now; the deal's off!"

Travis kept playing, reaching a new verse that Jim hadn't heard before. One that was more of a chant than true song. Both he and the cop listened, not sure what to do, not sure how it would all play out.

"She was your baby sister," Travis said, his voice singsong and eyes glazing. "She loved you so much. But loves turns to hate and greed kills body and soul. She wanted to give away millions to charity, more than you wanted. She had to go, so you killed her."

The audience gasped. A few men even had tears running down their cheeks. Almost as one, they turned their eyes to their boss.

"What?" she demanded, her voice raising a pitch. "You believe this guy? He's a mental patient!"

"There's a secret place, a place you let her play when she was little," Travis continued. "It was so easy to knock her body in so there would be no evidence."

The cop stepped forward." Ma'am," he began.

She seemed to notice Jim and the officer for the first time.

"Get him out of here!" she ordered, flailing her arms. "He's crazy!"

"You had one of your recording operators doctor footage to say you were here, preparing an album that didn't exist," Travis said. "You have him a night together in return."

"Why?" a man cried, flinging himself out of his chair. He knelt, and put his hand in his head and wept. "Why did I do it? That poor angel! I'm so sorry!"

"Shut up!" Ms. Stone said. "Just shut up!"

But it was too late. As if entranced, the other executives stood. They began to move towards Ms. Stone, whose face changed from anger to fear. She took a step back.

"Now wait a minute," she said. "You can't..."

Travis stopped playing and began to laugh at her. A hard, bitter, cynical laugh that had never come out of him before. One of the executives reached out and tried to strike her, but she ducked and screamed.

The policeman standing next to Jim suddenly snapped out of the daze, and brandished his gun.

"Enough! Stand away now!" he shouted.

While he frantically called for backup, Travis grew silent, and collapsed in a heap on the floor. The man stood down, and they all heard sirens in the distance.

The weeping man stood as well, and looked at the cop. "I need to make a confession."

"Yeah," the cop said, looking at the trembling Ms. Stone. "I bet."

More cops came and took both Ms. Stone and her accomplice away. The other executives were all talking among themselves about the events of the night. Jim, meanwhile, ran over to Travis.

His old friend was still conscious, and looked strangely calm. He noticed Jim, and smiled faintly.

"It's okay Jim," he said. "It's over."

He pointed to his fallen guitar, and Jim noticed something about it. One of the cords had broken in half.

When he looked closer, he saw that the broken cord was, in fact, a human hair.

The Last Hour

Jefferson Clark's usual doctor wasn't able to make rounds that day, so another came instead. Mr. Clark had been in the hospital for about two weeks now, as pneumonia made its way through his eighty year old lungs. They had told him it was an organism called MRSA, and he had accordingly been given vancomycin and the appropriate supportive care. Despite the hospital's best efforts, it had progressed into sepsis. Put simply, Mr. Clark was dying.

He watched the new physician, a Dr. Ahriman, check his vital signs. The doctor had brought in a mantle clock,

and placed it on the table, saying that it was a present from a friend. Clark suspected that Ahriman was just trying to humor him. He had no friends or family. His parents and siblings were dead, he had never managed to find a wife, and he had been retired from teaching literature at the university long enough that his former students and colleagues were already forgetting him. For they had not loved him as much as his work.

Despite John Donne's assurances that no man was an island, Clark suspected, rather strongly, that he was one. A lonely desolate island in the south seas of the world that few knew and fewer still bothered with. In light of it all, it took a constant force of will to keep despair at day.

He turned off the radio when it began playing Song of Sorrow, a new popular but depressing track. It was

the last thing he needed to hear now. Then he turned to Dr. Ahriman.

"Well?" Clark called out.

"I'm afraid your vitals have failed to improve, Mr. Clark," the doctor spoke up, compassion in his face. He sat at the chair next to the patient's bed. A tall, powerfully built man, the doctor had a full grey beard, grey thinning hair, and the coldest grey eyes Clark had ever seen. Despite the doctor's words and mannerisms, there was something in those eyes that he didn't like.

"Then, I'm dying."

"Yes. I'm afraid conventional medicine will be of little help to you. However..."

Dr. Ahriman hesitated, and looked around, as though ensuring that no nurses were in earshot. Then he stood, shut the door, and picked up the clock. Setting it to eleven in the evening, though that wasn't the correct

time, he wound it, and sat back down. The timepiece began to tick quietly.

"Why did you do that?" Clark asked, frowning.

"I told you that there is no medicine for you, sir," Ahriman answered quietly. He looked into the old man's eyes. "To put it bluntly, you could go at any time. Unless, of course, you would like a reprieve of sorts."

He gestured to the clock. "Do you like the present, sir?"

"I guess so," Clark said, baffled at the strange conversation. "But what are you getting at?"

"It is of custom make. I believe that it will help you with your problem. I want you to sit here with me for an hour. We will talk, and you will pay attention to both my timepiece and the flowers on your windowsill."

A nurse had brought in the plants a few days ago to try and brighten his mood. Clark did as he was told, and

kept his gaze on them as he chatted with Ahriman. The doctor assured him that he had no other patients at the moment, so they talked about his life as a professor and about some of his favorite authors.

Ahriman remained, for his part, rather vague on his own past. He mentioned coming from a large house, and fighting with his father and being turned out with his friends a long time ago. But beyond that, the doctor seemed disinclined to talk, and instead listened to his patient.

As he talked, Clark noticed something strange happening. The flowers seemed to be drying out very fast. He could have sworn that the nurse had watered them this morning, but they seemed to have lost the power to live. Soon, the petals began to fall off. When the mantle clock struck twelve, the flowers died completely.

"Well, the hour is up," Ahriman pronounced with a smile. "Tell me, how are you feeling?"

"Why, I feel...better," Clark noticed with surprise. It was true. He felt a small burst of energy within, and his lungs had cleared. Ahriman nodded, and pulled a mirror out of his pocket. Holding it up to the old man's face, Clark saw renewed vigor in his features. Even a few of the wrinkles appeared somewhat smoother.

"You see, the clock has the power to transfer life from one living thing to another," Ahriman explained. "I understand how that sounds, but you see the results for yourself."

Clark shook his head. Was he dreaming? Or was he only going into delirium before death? And yet, he could feel the truth of Ahriman's words. The proof lay before him.

"It only stands to reason, of course, that the larger and closer the life is to you, the more life you can in turn get," Ahriman continued. "If you could get, say…another person…”

Clark looked up quickly in shock.

"You protest?" Ahriman asked. "But you just told me you have nobody. You lie here, dying alone. What is the rest of the world to you anyway? What do you owe them?"

"Who are you?" Clark asked, in a frightened whisper.

Ahriman smiled, and stood up again. "I think you can answer that." His smile dropped and he looked at the old patient with compassion. Somehow it gave his face a masklike look.

"I'm not here to ask you for anything. I don't ask you to do anything for me. All I want is for you to use my gift."

"I'd be hurting others," Clark said, "Killing them. I would become a…parasite."

"What of that? All life is parasitic, isn't it? You raise plants and livestock to sustain yourselves. Animals hunt for their food. Man preys upon itself in war."

Ahriman shrugged. "I will know your choice when you make it."

With that, the doctor left, and Clark stared warily at the clock in his room. His mind raced with fear, but the object seemed to have no power to hurt him. The fear slowly gave way to curiosity. Could he use it on someone else and be young again? Could he live his life over, and perhaps make it happier?

He awakened to the sound of a knocking at his door. He sat up in bed and looked at his wall clock. It was five in the afternoon. Looking at the mantle clock, he saw

that it wasn't running, but had somehow moved back to eleven o'clock.

"Come in," Clark called out.

The door opened and a young man wearing a sterile mask and carrying a Bible, entered. It was the hospital chaplain. He nodded and smiled at the patient through the protective mask.

"Good afternoon, sir. I thought I would pay you a visit."

Clark looked from the chaplain to the clock, debating with himself. Dare he do something so wicked? Would he ever have another chance? Wouldn't he always wonder, what would have happened if he didn't?

"Thank you. Please come closer," Clark replied, beckoning.

As the man entered, Clark pointed to the clock. "You are the second visitor I've had today," he said off-

handedly. "I just received this. Would you mind winding it for me? Then you may read to me from your Bible, if you wish."

"Sure," the chaplain said, sitting on the chair. He picked up the clock and got it to start ticking, but found he couldn't change the time. It still read eleven, and began its slow, but certain progression to twelve, whether that would be noon or midnight.

Clark bade the young man to pay it no mind, saying he would have someone else examine it later. The chaplain shrugged, and began to read. Clark only half listened, and kept his gaze on the clock.

Thirty minutes passed. The chaplain was reading from the account of Christ in the garden, praying for deliverance from the impending death. Clark watched as the young man seemed to be slowly graying about the

temples. His breathing seemed to grow more labored, and he coughed a few times, rather wetly.

Clark, on the other hand, felt his own lungs clearing considerably. He looked at his hands. They looked younger, as though he were still a man of forty instead of eighty. He looked at the IV. The vancomycin had run out, so he pulled the needle, and stood up.

The chaplain stopped reading, and looked up. His eyes widened, and he dropped the Bible when he saw Clark's renewed form.

"Tell me, chaplain, do you think prayers are really answered?" Clark asked grimly.

"Yes; I think I must be seeing a miracle. I..." the chaplain broke off when he heard his own voice. Since he stopped reading, it had grown hoarse from age and sickness.

He stood up, ran into the room's bathroom, and looked in the mirror. Clark waited for the man to gasp loudly and ran back out. His eyes were panicked at having seen the change.

"What's happening to me?" he demanded.

"It seems we are trading places," Clark answered.

The chaplain went to the door, intending to run to the emergency room. The doorknob wouldn't budge. Frightened, the chaplain began pounding on the door. Voices of alarmed nurses could be heard, but they couldn't open the door either.

"I don't think you can leave until this is over," Clark offered. "You see, I think God answers prayers too. But sometimes, the answer is no. But another angel gave me another option. The clock here."

"But why? I never did anything to you?" the chaplain protested. His voice began to crack.

"I know that. I'm sorry; I really am. But, you see, I'm also afraid to die, faith notwithstanding."

The chaplain's still ageing face fell. Then he seemed to get an idea. He ran up to the clock, but Clark, now younger and stronger, pushed him back into the corner.

Another twenty five minutes passed. The nurses were still trying to get in, and Clark continued to gaze at the chaplain. The latter was now an old man, breathing heavily from pneumonia.

He had wisely not tried to attack again. Instead, he knelt in a corner, praying silently, and beginning to cry. Clark tried to steel himself, but felt his resolve beginning to slip. He had no right to do this, and he knew it. Furthermore, he knew that if he continued to employ the clock, it would always be this same scenario.

"Now, look here," Clark spoke up in a young man's voice. "I already told you I don't enjoy this. That means I'm not cruel, right?"

The chaplain had not tried to answer him for several minutes. He didn't say anything now. He merely prayed and wept, and Clark felt anger, though he wasn't sure whether he was angry at himself or at the chaplain.

"I'm doing you a favor, really," Clark said. "You will die in a few minutes, fairly peacefully, I think. You won't have to face the world anymore. You won't have to live in loneliness, you..."

Clark broke off when he looked at the chaplain again, for he noticed something he hadn't before. The man had a ring on his finger. Clark had known loneliness, but this man knew love, both human and divine.

Somehow, that revelation evaporated all his resolve. With a snarl, Clark turned on the clock. Just as it began to strike twelve, he picked it up, and dashed it to the ground with all the rigor of youth.

In the hallway, the head nurse finally opened the door. She had heard muffled shouts, and then a loud crash. When she opened the door, she saw the young chaplain emerge. He looked at her as he took off his mask.

“I'm all right," he said simply.

"What happened?" she demanded. "We couldn't budge the door until just now. What about Mr. Clark?"

She peered in the room. Jefferson Clark was dead. On the floor, his corpse knelt in the pose of a penitent man. His now cold fingers clasped the chaplain's discarded Bible.

Pieces of a clock littered the floor by the bed.

The chaplain nodded once. "He's all right now, too," he whispered.

He looked out the window. A snowfall had begun. The season of winter was here.